



Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Volume 02

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Before You Read (Reference)

In my attempt to romanise the different ranks of the Gu Fang hierarchy, I have used various words from the peerage system and then updated them. Others, such as the servant hierarchy is common knowledge. I do try to romanise the language as much as possible, while keeping the basic meaning to avoid confusion. If you still get lost in the midst of the rank naming, just get into this story (this part can serve as a reference). Hopefully it'll all clear out later.

Nobility/Government Court Ranks

- King: (part of the “Royal House”, lives in the “Royal Residence”), holds all power, married to the Queen and often, several concubines part of the royal harem.
- Prince/Princess: Only the direct inheritors of the throne (the sons of the King) will be given this title. (Part of the “Royal House”, lives in the “Royal Residence.”) A high-ranking princess may marry a lesser known man, known as the Prince Consort.
- Duke: Similar in rank to Prince, may or may not have royal blood connections. In other words, dukes may be princes or people from recognised families. Being called a “duke” seems to give more military advantage. (Part of the “House of...”, lives in a “...Ducal Residence”). The wife of a duke is known as the Duchess and their sons may be able to inherit subsidiary titles such as “the Marquess of...”
- Scholar: Not nobility. Usually a commoner/peasant who has gotten the King’s respect due to high placing in national exam. Top scholars tend to be awarded an “official” rank and often became City Governor or military commanders. Sort of like the “count” role in the peerage system.
- Official: All of the above, except women (e.g duchess) and the King. Basically, they can all serve in court. This is technically synonymous with “minister”. The most trusted officials are often from well-known families, especially the two below.
- Senior Official: A more correct translation would be “Prime Minister”; however, it’s a bit too late to change the translation of volume 01. The most important official that serves the courts.
- Elder Statesman: Literal translation is “nation’s husband”, however, the Elder Statesman appears to be the father of the Queen, or Prince Consort etc.

Military Ranks

- [Military] General: The strongest warrior(s) and/or main commander(s) of the war. This person may go to the front lines and fight. There is also sometimes a “Main General.”
- [Military] Advisor: Someone who doesn’t usually go to fight (but may go to battlefield if needed). Basically someone who thinks of all the tactics to use and does the planning etc. I’m using the word “advisor” to cover both strategists and tacticians.
- [Military] Commander: A person who commands an army or part of it, to war when needed.
- Warrior: A soldier who is recognised for his strength in battle.
- Soldier: A fighter in the war.

******The King is supposed to have absolute control over the military. They may, however, give out a Flag of Command so that another person may control the army on his behalf. In this novel, the term “military” is used synonymously to “army”.

Servant Ranks

- Upper Servants: Housekeeper, Lady’s Maid, manservants, Doctor
- Senior Servants (Middle/Lower upper, requires some skill): Nurse, Cook, Seamstress
- Under Servants (manual labour): Housemaids (e.g. Kitchenmaid, Matron, maid), Footmen, Eunuchs

Addressing Others (if not by name/politer form)

- Contrary to proper peerage address, the King is still often addressed as “King” instead of “Sire” or “Your Majesty”, while the Queen is still often addressed as “Queen”. Likewise, “Duke”, “Duchess”, “Princess” etc.
- People will be greeted as “Mister”/“Sir” or “Miss”/“Missus”/“My Lady”/“Madam” or by title. (less polite>more polite)

- When referring by third person, not by title, after all (possessive) pronouns or articles must be capitalised, i.e. “the Lady” (specifically referring a lady), “his Master” etc.
- The direct master of any servant may be addressed as “Master” or “My Lady”.
- The nurse will be acknowledged as “Mother ~”. Sometimes older (under) maids may also be acknowledged as a “matron”.
- Important maids may be addressed as “Sis ~” by younger maids, or as “Miss ~” by older maids.
- “You” pronoun is used very rarely. Usually it is omitted or replaced with one of the above simple because it’s not necessary in Chinese grammar. However, this can make it very hard to translate without leading to confusion. Often the above has been used in translation to make things clearer.

*Servants often inherit their master’s family name.

Name Patterns (these often indicate something about identity)

- -Boy: This is actually the antonym of “lao” (old) but this nickname method is usually used for men and stereotypically, tired middle-aged men (though a lot of teenagers use it too nowadays). Therefore the use of “boy” is the same sort of off-putting, belittling, but at the same time endearing, as the use of “lao”.
- Xiao-: Literally means “small”. A form of endearment. Think of this as “-chan” (Japanese) honorifics. In historical context, the addition of this character does give a slave-like quality to it, especially to women’s names. However, I tend to not keep this prefix as it makes names sound too similar, especially for non-Chinese speakers. Besides, a single character for a name, e.g. “Hong” already gives a poor impression, as richer families tend to give their children compound names (more than one character, e.g. “Pingting”).
- -‘er: This character doesn’t really mean anything on its own (though it does seem to slur the character before it). This is also a form of endearment. Think of this as a “-y” or “-ie” in English, e.g. Maddison goes to Maddie. I usually keep this suffix as is, because I don’t like modifying the pinyin of names. (Unless you want “Qing’er” to become something like “Qingie” haha)
- A-: This is a common addition to single character names. It strongly hints peasantry in general, the poorer farmers. Not quite so in modern times though.
- (Older) Sis: This is an endearing way of addressing older girls (younger than 25 I’d say) by a younger girl. Think of this as the “-neechan” (Japanese) honorific. I did not keep it in pinyin (“-jie” or “jiejie”) to avoid confusion of Chu Beijie’s name. There doesn’t seem to be many cases in Gu Fang where an older girl calls a younger girl, a “(younger) sis” (“meimei”) anyway and it’s easy to figure out when they do. When two girls say that they’re like “sisters,” that means they’re best friends. Funny how a lot of people don’t get along with their blood-related sisters, even in China.
- Brother: Could be younger or older. Could be blood related or not. “Bro” is a bit too informal in this case (not that “sis” isn’t, but “bro” doesn’t quite picture familiar but somewhat formal relationship).

Addressing Oneself

- Own name: Some people address themselves in third person, e.g. Pingting may say, “Pingting only wants...” Unlike Japanese, this is not quite as “cutesy”, and is very often used to create a historical setting by Chinese to show modesty.
- Own title: Often the King may use something like “guaren”, the officials may use “chen”, Chu Beijie uses “benwang” to address themselves. These literally mean their own title. However, it isn’t as straight forward to us English speakers, therefore I usually just translate it as “I”.

Book Three

"Handling Dreams"

Chapter 28

To describe the kind of woman Bai Pingting is was something that even Chu Beijie couldn't do.

He sat up in bed, his eyes full of unrest as he turned to the figure lying beside him.

The morning sun managed only a trace of light to pierce the heavy clouds and fall softly on her spread-out black hair. He saw a hint of smile on her unsuspecting sleeping face.

A good dream?

Chu Beijie couldn't help it. He drew closer to her.

He knew he hadn't been nice to her.

For eight months, she has been imprisoned in the west chamber. Every night he violated her, gaining a lingering ecstasy each time, but he had yet to be nice to her once.

Why does she still have sweet dreams? Chu Beijie didn't understand.

He neared her, wanting to see the smile in her lips in more detail. The breath ejected from her nose sent strands of her soft hair fluttering.

Her thick eyelashes began to flutter. Chu Beijie pulled away and slipped out of the bed.

Pingting opened her eyes, seeing Chu Beijie's turned back. She sat up, whispering, "Up already, Duke?"

His back. It was always and only the back view.

Last night's affection was a passing cloud. When she woke, not even a trace was left.

The Chu Beijie she saw today was the same as that day he left without a word, his straight posture and unchanging heart of stone.

Eight months have passed. Now is the season of snow. Spring was still in a distant place.

"Miss, you're up?" Her personal maid, Hongqian, stepped into the room holding a brass basin full of hot water. She placed it down on the table and rubbed her hands while saying, "It's really cold today, and snow already started falling before dawn. It isn't heavy, but it's still dreadfully cold. You should wash soon, while the water's still hot."

She walked forward, helping Pingting off the bed. Catching a glimpse of Pingting's frown, she hurriedly asked, "What's wrong? Are you feeling unwell?"

Pingting sat back on the bed. She closed her eyes to compose herself before opening them again. Shaking her head Pingting replied, "It's nothing. I simply rose too quickly hence a hamstring was pulled."

The water was warm. The mist whirled and lightly danced, enveloping the smoothly polished copper basin. Pingting slowly immersed her fingers into the water, appreciating the different temperatures.

Hongqian stared at the ten fingers, sighing softly. "What beautiful hands."

"Beautiful?" Pingting questioned.

"Beautiful."

Pingting pulled her hands out of the water and Hongqian wrapped them in a white cotton towel, gently patting dry.

Tender fingertips, beautifully shaped nails and thin, scallion-like fingers.

Pingting laughed. "What's the point about beauty? These two hands can no longer play the qin."

"Why?" Hongqian asked curiously.

Pingting didn't appear to be in the mood for talking. She turned away, idly looking at the bitterness of winter outside her window.

Hongqian had already been serving Pingting for over a month and knew her temper. Knowing that she'd been speaking out of place, she didn't ask any further. She good-naturedly packed up the things, picking up the basin and preparing to exit the west chamber.

The maid walked out of the threshold. She was about to turn to close the door when she heard a voice.

The voice was like smoke and vulnerable to the wind. It left a hint of incense residual that lingered by the ear.

"I...don't have a qin."

The qin quickly came.

Not quite noon, a guqin had been placed on the desk.

It wasn't something fancy like the tail-burnt guqin or made of parasol-tree, but to find such a thing in such a desolate place within half a day was an achievement within itself.

Pingting reached out, touching that qin. She stroked it gently and lovingly as if it weren't a qin but a frightened kitten, needing much comfort.

Hongqian came in again.

"Miss, you can play qin now right?"

Pingting shook her head.

Hongqian continued, "Don't you have a qin now?"

It seemed as if pain or something else hooked the corners of Pingting's red lips into a laugh, but she still shook her head absentmindedly. "What's the point of having a qin? No one's listening, therefore why waste the effort?"

"I'll listen."

"You?" Pingting paused, turning around. She smiled. "Can you understand what you hear?"

Before Hongqian's frustration surfaced, Pingting began to laugh softly. "Oh well, I'll just assume you understand it then."

Hands were washed; incense was lit.

The hazy white smoke fluttering in midair brought an indescribable tenderness that gently floated at the tip of people's noses.

Pingting kneeled and composed herself.

She plucked a string....

Following the soft sound, the notes danced away from the strings with invisible wings, stretching out with graceful posture and extending into the beyond.

“When there is trouble, there are heroes; when there are heroes, there are beautiful women; surviving the turmoil, surviving the turmoil...”

She opened her heart to the singing, plucking the strings with greater emotion.

Whether it be about heroes or beautiful women.

This phrase, she knew, was just silly people in a silly knot of emotion.

“If there are soldiers, there will be fame; if there is fame, there will be fraud; soldiers know fraud, soldiers know fraud...”

Despite her hands being both thin and white, her singing was as steady as a rock.

As she plucked the strings, it was as if she had returned to the dangerously shrouded cliffs of the Cloud Valley route where she was in Chu Beijie's arms, promising to never go against each other despite the abyss below their feet.

If soldiers knew fraud, then what about feeling?

Yangfeng was a thousand miles away. She sent three letters, each word carrying tears and sorrow. Each one was more anxious than the last.

Pingting restrained her emotion. She ripped each and every one of those letters sent from a thousand miles into shreds until they became flying paper butterflies that filled the skies.

It was the cause.

How to explain? What to explain?

She could not end the House of Jing-An bloodline.

Nor did she want to believe that Chu Beijie's love for her was nothing but a perfect scam.

If there were true feelings, how could one lose to fraud?

If there was deep love, then believe to the end. Love until the end. Regardless of the innumerable twists and turns, one's mind should never be changed.

“Swallows bring fortune, but too much fortune brings damage. A joy to look, a joy to look...”

Steadily and tactfully overturning the accusations was the most intelligent approach.

Praying for a test of heart? It's foolish to use love to resolve resentment.

Pingting stroked the qin, chuckling softly.

When women want love, they do everything they can.

She had always been smart, so being foolish this one time meant no harm.

The final note glided into the air, hovering in the ceiling beams as if reluctant to leave. Pingting raised her head and saw Hongqian's intoxicated face, two teardrops already forming on her eyelashes.

"Silly girl, what are you crying for?" Pingting couldn't help but laugh.

Hongqian raised a hand to wipe away her tears, saying unhappily, "It's all Miss' fault for playing such a miserable song yet I'm the one who's to blame."

Pingting wrinkled her little nose, revealing a childish expression. She spluttered, "Such a good song, yet in your ears, it becomes miserable?"

She took her hands off the qin and was about to tell Hongqian to pack it away, when Moran entered the room. "The Duke said that after Miss is finished playing, the qin must be returned. Whenever Miss wishes to play in the future, she is welcome to borrow it again."

Pingting's expressive eyes rotated before hesitantly nodding her head. "Sounds good." She had Moran pack up the qin and walked over to the side table where a cup of tea was waiting for her.

Hongqian hurriedly added, "Miss, please don't drink it; that tea is cold. I'll go brew some hot tea now." She moved forwards, ready to receive the piece of ceramic.

Pingting didn't bother. "I feel hot from just finish playing qin, so cold tea is fine." Not waiting for Hongqian to come to her side, she drank from the cup. In one gulp, not one drop was left. Moran had just picked up the qin and although he tried to stop her, it was already too late.

It was winter hence the tea was as cold as ice water. Ever since the chaos at the Jing-An Ducal Residence, Pingting had undergone all sorts of setbacks, resulting in weaker health. Suddenly chugging this huge mouthful of frozen tea down her throat made her chest stiffen and was momentarily unable to speak.

Hongqian, seeing her expression, urgently said, "See, the cold has gotten to you now."

Hongqian hurriedly began to fetch hot water, but Pingting grabbed her, whispering, "It's fine, just choked a little". She raised her head to see Moran who was still holding the qin. "Why are you still standing? Go back soon. If you're late, the Duke will be angry again."

Moran bowed and stepped out of the room. He did not head towards the Duke's office. Instead, Moran turned twice at the end of the corridor until he arrived in a room adjacent to Pingting's where Chu Beijie was waiting. He was wrapped in a mink coat, his face ashen.

"Duke, I've got the qin back."

Chu Beijie scanned that qin, frowning as he asked, "How is she?"

"She's a bit pale."

"Nonsense!" Chu Beijie's face darkened even more. "If it's to relieve boredom, playing something cheerful is fine but not these complex, mind-probingly classical pieces." After saying this, he loudly harrumphed.

Moran only then understood that the "nonsense" was not aimed at himself but at Pingting. He sighed secretly in relief when he heard Chu Beijie instruct, "Find a doctor to take her pulse."

"Yes." Moran lowered his head as he obeyed.

Chu Beijie's eyebrows locked in a frown. "Who could stand such a large cup of ice cold tea? Tell Hongqian to serve her carefully and prevent this from happening again." Moran agreed, secretly peeking at Chu Beijie's expression

which remained a raven black mess. The Duke's temper was always abrupt when it came to Bai Pingting, making it difficult to figuring out.

The qin's sound sprinkling life was for a brief moment and could no longer be heard.

Chu Beijie returned to his office in the afternoon. He wasn't always in the office. Most of the time he dwelled in the neighbouring room. Doing paperwork was a lie. How would he still have paperwork these days? The secluded little building used wood thinner than his ducal residence, and it was unable to cover any sound. If Pingting sung, even if she sang softly, her sound still floated from her room room to beyond the wall, intoxicating Chu Beijie.

Even though intoxicated, he was definitely never drunk.

If he had gone crazy drunk, he would not hesitate to bypass that wall and stroll into Pingting's room to hug the singing person tightly to his chest, cherishingly and lovingly.

But he hadn't.

He stood at the wall, listening to her carefree singing, her conversations with Hongqian about the wind, grass and flowers that had yet to blossom.

Eight months. The most painful and longest eight months of his life.

Long ago he promised her when spring came and the flowers blossomed, he would pick some to take to the temple.

When will spring come?

When night dawned, Chu Beijie returned to Pingting's room.

Regardless of the violation, the indifference remained immovable.

"Duke." Pingting looked beyond the window. There was not a star in the cold, lonely night sky. She lowered her voice, "Tomorrow, perhaps there'll be heavy snow?"

Chu Beijie held her, seemingly asleep.

She knew that he wasn't asleep.

He knew she knew of his pretense.

Apart from indifference, he had no idea how to punish the woman beside him nor how to punish himself.

"It's my birthday tomorrow." Pingting whispered into Chu Beijie's ears. "Will the Duke accompany me? It'll snow tomorrow so allow me to play qin for Duke while admiring the snow..."

Chu Beijie couldn't stand it any longer. He widened his arms and hugged Pingting tightly, receiving a yelp.

Don't say any more; don't speak any more. So what about your birthday? Pingting, I can only love you like this under the cover of darkness. When morning comes, my dearest Brother and the spirits of his dead children surface once more.

Chu Beijie parted early in the morning. Pingting stared at his back, biting her lip and staying silent.

The sky transitioned to light. The brief period of sun was replaced by gloom, dark clouds, causing a pressuringly bitter chill.

"Ah, it's going to snow?" Hongqian breathed a sigh.

Pingting was sitting by the window. She held out her hand. She turned her head, "Look." In the middle of her palm laid a single snowflake.

“It’s snowing.”

The snowflakes fell gently and quietly, but the winds picked up intensity, hurling the frozen droplets of water around. The sky was sullenly overcast as if sick of the sun and planned to chase it behind the clouds forever.

The sand in the hourglass slipped little by little, and Pingting silently counted.

Today was her birthday, and three hours have been wasted already.

She was born in the midst of snow—at least what she imagined—though in reality, it was the Duchess who was. The parents she had never met were perhaps the only people who knew the exact date of Bai Pingting’s birth.

She remembered the day the Duchess brought her to the Ducal residence. She’d boasted, “With a wit as smart as snow, she must be a baby born in heavy snow.” The Duchess then chose a snowy day to be the anniversary of her birth.

Pingting liked snow. Every year on her birthday, the Ducal Residence was vibrant with celebration. He Xia often invited a crowd of nobles to drink, Prince He Su included. The more the boys grew tipsy and drunk, the more urgent the encouragements were. “Pingting, play the qin! Hurry up and play qin! Pingting, play a piece please!”

Dongzhuo loved to prank the most and often already had the qin over brought and prepared. He’d pull her over and placed her hands at the strings as she doubled over, laughing. The crowd would always be noisy at first. As the qin sounded, everything quickly quietened down. Whether leaning or standing, they listened to the song while admiring the snow. As one song was finished, she’d hear a soft applause that was different from everyone else’s. She’d happily turn around, yelling, “Yangfeng, don’t you dare be lazy! I’m the birthday girl, so for every song, you have to play ten.”

Pingting began to chuckle, then struggled to restrain her smile.

The heavy snow seemed to mock the metamorphosis of life.

The day’s loneliness was something that no one needed to care about, but Chu Beijie had to.

He shouldn’t disregard it.

She gazed at the hourglass once more, watching the time slipping grain by grain. The person she wanted to see did not come. She had endured all sorts of coldness in these eight months yet she had not seen a smile nor heard any warm words. Why was there nothing in return?

“Hongqian.”

Hongqian stepped through a side door, asking, “What would you like, Miss?”

Pingting lowered her head, examining her slender fingers.

“Find the Duke.” She articulated each word carefully, with a pause after each. “I want to borrow the qin.”

The qin was quickly borrowed, and Moran personally carried and prepared it, saying, “If Miss would like to play qin to relieve her boredom, play something light. If it’s complex or mind-probing, please don’t play at all.”

“Where’s the Duke?”

“The Duke is...” Moran avoided her gaze, “is in his office doing paperwork.”

“Is he busy today?”

Moran was silent for a long time before he replied with a single word. “Yes.”

Pingting nodded her head. “I understand. As for the qin, I’ll return it afterwards.”

As Moran left, Hongqian tried to light the incense. Pingting interrupted her. "No need, I'll do it myself."

She personally broke the incense, lit it, and brought the water. She carefully dipped her hands, slowly patted them dry and sat at the qin.

Pingting positioned herself. With a small smile, she placed her scallion like fingers onto the qin, calmly tuning a few notes. She combined a vibrato and a trill, creating a startling agitation as if an armoured cavalry units rushed from within. The entire room instantly quieted down.

Pingting was on a verge of laughter yet her face was solemn, her fingers anxious. Within a moment, raging battle cries, neighing horses, and thundering drums engulfed the surroundings shook the skies. The listening Hongqian's face was pale as she tightly clutched to the cloth covering her chest, completely devoid of energy.

Chu Beijie was not to blame; it was her own fault.

It was she who blocked Chu Beijie's movement and it was she who said, "That promise still stands. Please let Pingting follow Duke to the ends of the earth, my honour is decided by Duke and my death decided by Duke."

She had held out her hand, which Chu Beijie took.

From thereon, her honour, life and death, was not hers but his.

She thought she'd endured enough.

Since last spring, all she received was a back view with no lingering feelings. She had endured for eight months and finally given up on this day, a day she dearly hoped to have some affection. She would endure anything for a phrase, an expression, or even for a single trace of the person she loved.

It was a pity, but there was nothing at all.

The qin sound gradually calmed as if the sounds of war had come to an end and the few surviving bloodstained horses stood on the battlefield while a fire lightly burned a fallen flag. It was utterly desolate.

Thick sweat oozed out of Pingting's forehead, yet she refused to give up. She struggled to finish the remaining notes. Her upper body swayed slightly before crumpling to gravity.

Hongqian was too shocked by the qin sound and had not yet recovered. A figure rushed into the room, catching hold of Pingting with one hand and the placing the other on top of the qin to cease its sound.

Pingting could only feel someone supporting her and felt her heart throb with excitement as she turned. The light in her eyes suddenly dimmed as she pursed her lips. "Let go." She struggled to get up. A pang of dizziness instantly washing over yet she refused to make any sound.

Moran hurriedly let go, reasonably saying, "The Duke is currently working outside this room. Miss' qin sound...is too loud."

Pingting's expression was tired. She laughed bitterly. "I am so sorry about that."

Moran then added, "The Duke also reminds that Miss is borrowing this qin. Since Miss has already played a few pieces, it's time to take it back."

"Moran, I want to see the Duke."

Moran hesitated for a moment as if listening to the surroundings. He waited for a while before gritting his teeth. "The Duke is very busy. He will come in the evening as usual."

"I have something important that I must tell him." Pingting stressed every word. "I must clarify all of the misunderstandings he currently has."

Moran hesitated for a while again, but there was no sound to be heard. This time, even he seemed a little disappointed himself, and sighed as he repeated, "The Duke, he...he will come in the evening as usual."

Pingting's eyes flicked over to Moran who seemed to be afraid of her gaze. He turned away. Pingting lowered her voice. "You can take it back. Thank the Duke for me." She could no longer take the weight of her body and gripped the chair for support as she slowly sat down.

Moran picked up the qin and spun out of the room.

Chu Beijie was not in his office. He was standing in the middle of the raging snowstorm. His body stood, determined and fixed like iron as if completely unaware of the snow around him.

"Duke, I have retrieved the qin." Moran passed the qin to him.

A few snowflakes had gotten onto the qin. In Chu Beijie's eyes, it brought an unexpected prickling sensation.

He was regretting it. He shouldn't have given her a qin and shouldn't have listened to the qin's sound. Pingting's last piece fluttered in his heart like an unwavering ghost yet stabbed at his heart like a knife, slicing his flesh into the finest pieces while death lingered. When he heard that final, elegiac piece, he had felt an overpowering devastation, scaring him into a cold sweat.

Without his few remaining threads of reason, he wouldn't have asked Moran to go in. He would have rushed inside himself. He'd pick her up and would severely warn her to never, ever, play such a piece again.

She had enough of life.

She didn't care about life or death. She wanted, with war-like determination, to generously cut her throat and die a tragic death that belonged to anyone but herself.

He deeply hated her but could not stand the idea of losing her.

Moran couldn't help but ask, "Duke, are you really not going to see Miss Bai? Miss Bai said..."

Chu Beijie's gaze was like daggers and tossed the qin at his face, which he caught with a shudder.

Moran hurriedly lowered his head, "I, your servant, deserve death."

A strong gust of wind blew past his ear. He felt something colder than the snow.

It was a while before he heard Chu Beijie's deep voice.

"You can go."

Chu Beijie returned to his office and did not come out again, not even for lunch. Moran was jumpy all day. He uncomfortably waited for two hours in the side room until Hongqian entered with a food container. She asked worriedly, "What are we to do? Miss refuses to eat."

She opened the food container, taking each dish out one by one—two different meat dishes, two different vegetable dishes, a dish of pickled radish, and snowy white rice. None were touched.

"I spent ages begging her, but she seemed to be counting the rice grains or something. After picking out a few, she put her chopsticks down and said she was full. If this continues, she'll end up getting sick. The Duke would peel the skin off all of us servants."

"Peel whose skin?" A looming shadow appeared at the doorway to the office.

This startled Hongqian. She spun around to look but quickly lowered her head. "Duke..."

Chu Beijie's gaze fell on the laid out dishes of the food container. "Is it her?"

“Yes,” replied Moran.

Hongqian carefully, concisely reported, “Miss Pingting only drank half of bowl of porridge this morning. She barely touched her lunch. I thought this wasn’t too good, so I came to tell General Chu.”

Chu Beijie’s heavy gaze shot towards her. “Has she been like this recently?”

“Her appetite hasn’t been good since winter. She is eating less and less these days and it seemed a little better last night. She ate some side dishes and a whole bowl of rice.”

Moran seemed to remember something, and lowered his voice as he whispered to Chu Moran, “Last night, Duke told me to give the dishes sent from the Ducal Residence to Miss Bai. Perhaps...”

Chu Beijie listened, before instructing Hongqian. “There’s still some of those dishes left. Take them to her.”

Hongqian was originally chosen to serve Pingting for her clever and well-behaved nature. Seeing Chu Beijie unangered, the maid plucked up her courage. Her voice, involuntarily having a little too much fear, softly said, “Reporting to the Duke, I thought that perhaps Miss Bai liked those side dishes, so I had them prepared for today. However, it wasn’t helpful at all. She didn’t touch them yet she claimed she was full.”

Chu Beijie coldly gazed at the cold dishes. “Understood, you may go.”

After sending back Hongqian, he turned to Moran. He faintly asked, “What do you think?”

“Yes?” Moran was perplexed by the question. After studying Chu Beijie’s expression, he knew that he couldn’t afford to say the wrong thing, but could only answer in such a way.

Chu Beijie seemed to be mumbling to himself however, “She can’t take it any more, right?”

“Duke...”

Before Moran could finish his words, Chu Beijie suddenly interrupted. “Don’t say anymore!” He turned away, his hands behind his back, shoulders constantly trembling. It could have been because of anger or of excitement. Several moments later, he finally calmed down. His voice was cold. “Let’s go to see her.”

The two neared Pingting’s room and happened to hear sound coming from the inside.

“Miss Bai, the Duke commanded me. I cannot defy his orders. Whether your body is unwell or not, please just let me take your pulse so that I can explain myself.”

“I’ll go see the Duke. Just say I’m not sick.”

Chu Beijie’s thick eyebrows suddenly creased. He pushed open the door and marched into the room. His body was huge. He stood by the window, blocking most of the sunlight to enter room and casting a massive shadow onto the floor.

The entire room fell quiet.

Pingting was wearing a little jacket. She sat on the bed covered in green velvet blankets, suggesting that she had just gotten up from an afternoon nap when the doctor had come. Her silky black hair had yet to be combed and was scattered on one side of her body. Her white face and black eyes were completely devoid of expression. She hadn’t expected that Chu Beijie would suddenly rush in. She only felt a huge gush of wind darting inside and the room dropping several degrees. She jerked her head upwards to meet Chu Beijie’s blazing eyes. Their hearts suddenly thumped as their gazes touched as if stuck together, unable to move.

Chu Beijie’s cold fury rose again but wavered under her gaze. Trying to regain his composure, he waved the others away, “You can all leave.”

Hongqian, Moran, and the doctor immediately cleared the way. Only two people locked in gaze remained in the entire

room.

Chu Beijie stared condescendingly at Pingting for a long time. He looked at her pale face and fragile, uncomfortable body, remembering her crisply healthy body back then. He was enraged she refused to see the doctor despite her current state. But the angrier he was, the calmer his tone. He asked, “You’re not such a disgraceful person, so why are you doing such a ridiculous thing for?”

It would have been better if he hadn’t asked. Pingting lowered her eyelids and began to chuckle softly. She raised her energetic eyes, smiling at Chu Beijie. “The Duke is here. Pingting’s goal is finally fulfilled.”

Even though she was not a beauty of the upper ranks, her clever eyes were seductive enough. Coupled with her sweet smile that revealed two fine dimples, Chu Beijie’s heart was pierced. Chu Beijie stepped forward until his line of sight was filled with her, the woman in her bed.

His war-like expression —cold and unfeeling—resurfaced again. Chu Beijie’s numbing coldness enveloped Pingting’s body.

“Even now that you are before me, why do you still play these pointless tricks?”

Pingting raised her head to look at Chu Beijie. She lowered her voice, “Duke is wrong. How is this a pointless trick?”

Having the Duke by Pingting’s side for this brief moment, in Pingting’s eyes, was a happiness that she would not swap for even all of the world’s riches.

This sentence was like a master move, an attack that caught Chu Beijie off guard. He had planned to leave, but couldn’t bear it right now. With a tug from Pingting’s small hand, he couldn’t help but sit down by the bed.

Pingting’s warm body leaned towards him, her hands tightly wound around his neck. Chu Beijie hated her for poisoning his nephews with her schemes and sworn never to show any affection. That moment, however, he couldn’t bear pushing away so he held her. “You wanted to see me to tell me what?”

“It’s too late.”

“Too late?”

Pingting hugged Chu Beijie tightly, lowering her voice. “I was going to say it, but Duke has missed that chance. Why would Pingting beg a third time to get someone to listen to their innocence? From my birth to my death, I will no longer tell Duke the truth. If you wish to wrongly accuse me, then go ahead and do so.”

Chu Beijie suddenly stood up, throwing her onto the bed, furious. “You’re not repenting and still playing these tricks?”

He turned and stormed away.

“Please wait, Duke!” Pingting suddenly yelped out, forcing Chu Beijie to pause.

“Pingting has already thought this through.” Pingting’s voice remained soft but gradually turned cold. “Since eight months of endurance is unable to make Duke fall in love with Pingting once more, there is no reason for Pingting to forcibly stay.”

Chu Beijie promptly turned around, his voice icier. “Don’t you dare run away.”

“No,” Pingting laughed shallowly, “I’m committing suicide.”

Chu Beijie laughed scornfully. “To use the death threat is the most flawed tactic ever.”

Pingting paid no attention to his scorn and continued, “Unless the Duke stays with me at all times, I will not continue to live peacefully.”

Chu Beijie fiercely replied, "In my hands, dying is not such an easy task."

Her determination met with Chu Beijie's blazing eyes, unwavering. Slightly ashamed, she lowered her voice, "A person who wishes wholeheartedly to commit suicide cannot be stopped by anyone."

Chu Beijie suddenly opened the curtains, allowing the snowflakes to spiral inside.

"Moran!"

"Here!" Moran hurriedly rushed forward.

"Make sure," he pointed at the thin figure in the room, "you take good care of her. If there is the slightest hint of an accident, report it to me at once!"

Chapter 29

Moran was unable to sleep that night. Chu Beijie's final expression as he left for the night shook his nerves, and he didn't dare to look at Pingting.

Who knew what words had darted out of her blood-red lips to have caused the Duke to lose his composure?

The overnight howling wind and falling snow did not stop for even the briefest moment.

Moran stood at one side and saw Hongqian crying as she begged, "Please Miss, don't cause trouble. The Duke is already angry."

Pingting lay propped on a couch, her eyes conveying her certainty. Her eyes flickered past Hongqian and jokingly said, "So it was for the Duke."

The sides of Hongqian's eyes were red as she hurriedly shook her head. "No, it's not that...it's not for the Duke; it's for Miss. You shouldn't damage your health like this. At least eat a little. If you get sick on such a cold day, what will I do?"

Pingting measured her for a moment and couldn't help but soften her heart. "Sit here." Pingting pulled the maid to sit and helped her smooth out the stray strands undone from her vigorous shaking. Pingting chuckled, "Silly girl, you don't need to worry."

"Dear god, how could I not be worried?" Thanks to Pingting's soft persuasion, Hongqian's tears ended up falling instead. "The Duke said that if anything happens to Miss, your servant would be punished according to the army's ways." She wiped away her tears, "The Duke has never gone back on his words." She shuddered at the thought of Chu Beijie's angry chilling gaze.

"The ways of the army are harsh, I can't help you either." Pingting was still acting leisurely, slowly leaning backwards.

At this state, Hongqian knew there wasn't the slightest change of heart and hurriedly stood back up. She shook her sleeve, saying, "Miss, of course you can help me. If Miss eats some food, then you've done me a huge favour."

Pingting seemed far away, out of earshot, thinking about something unknown. She appeared dazed out. Her gaze paused slightly on Hongqian before tightly closing her eyes, seemingly intending to sleep.

Hongqian however refused to give up. She begged. "Miss, you have a great heart. Miss, you couldn't let me die right?"

"Your life or death is in the Duke's hands," Pingting replied vaguely. "My life and death is also in the Duke's hands. Don't beg me, go beg the Duke." She turned to face the wall, refusing to say any more.

Moran observed coldly for the entire night. The second morning, he hurriedly arrived at Chu Beijie's bedroom. Chu Beijie's attendants apologised, "The Duke went to practice swordsmanship at dawn." Moran then rushed to the small courtyard where Chu Beijie practiced. When he reached the door, all he could hear was a sonorous voice overpowering the roar of wind and snow, followed by rattling sounds of clashing swords. Moran, surprised, quickened his approach to the courtyard.

Chu Beijie was sparring with his men, the blunt sword in his hands cleanly slicing horizontally and vertically; his tenacity was not easily stopped. It seemed that with every clash, at least one man would always fall out of the fight, but all his men were all battle-hardened, well-seasoned warriors. It wasn't for long before they retrieved their weapons to attack once more, despite still having difficult time to breathe. To a person unfamiliar with them, the fight between these two parties appeared to be a question of life and death.

When Moran had just placed one foot into the courtyard, his vision blurred as a shadow rushed towards him. His reaction was swift. Moran raised his hands, grabbed, and pinned Luoshang by the face against the courtyard wall. He whispered, "How's that?"

"You're finally here." Luoshang was also one of Chu Beijie's personal guards. He sighed in relief the moment he saw Moran. "Calm the Duke down, he's crazy today. We've been sparring in the snow for almost half an hour. There's no sign of stopping. Us brothers will probably have to rest in bed for eight to ten days now." Despite it all, Luoshang stooped down to pick up his sword and roared before rushing back into the spar. Chu Beijie countered his blow. The two struggled, locked by their swords.

Clang! The clash of swords rang.

Luoshang's two shoulders were almost completely numb. His blunt sword fell to the ground with a single thud. Chu Beijie's face was expressionless as he spat out, "Haven't worked hard enough." His left foot extended silently. Without warning, he kicked Luoshang near his waist, causing him to roll outside the fight.

"Duke, I have something to report." Moran stood apart from the fight, lowering his voice.

The Duke must have been waiting for Moran. He took a step back, sheathed his weapon, looked around and waved at the others. "That's enough for today, you can all go."

The already punished guards could barely straighten their backs. Like hunchbacks, they quickly answered 'yes' and helped each other up. None forgot to give Moran a look of gratitude as they left.

"What would you like to report?" Chu Beijie passed off his sword and took the warm towel from a maid. Despite the freezing wind and heavy snow, he was only wearing a single layer and was sweating profusely.

"Hongqian begged for an entire night but Miss Pingting refused to even touch a drop of water. I think..."

Bang!

Chu Beijie's hand slammed onto the wooden table. He sharply turned towards Moran, voice cold. "You can't even properly take care of just a woman? And you have to report to me this early in the morning? Go, I don't even want to hear that name."

Even when facing millions of troops, Chu Beijie had never lost his composure like now. Moran kept quiet, not daring to say a word. It took a few moments before he replied, "Yes." He backed out of the small courtyard, hesitating for a while. He then raised his head to look at Chu Beijie's back. There was no trace of his mind changing. He sighed a few times before turning around to leave.

The situation grew worse.

After the second day, no matter how Hongqian cried or begged, Pingting would no longer say a word.

She didn't just refuse food but also tea and other essential items. Whatever that was sent into her room warm, was left cold and untouched.

Hongqian asked Moran in a corner outside the room, “What to do? It’s already been two days. If this goes on any longer, even if a person of steel cannot last. Can General Chu think of any other ways?”

Moran’s well-chiselled features revealed a bitter smile. “What to do? Perhaps counter her with the military’s ways? At her state of health, force-feeding her will only make things worse.”

The two stood for a while in distress. Since their consultation resulted in no viable alternative, they had to turn back into the house.

Pingting was in the room, a scroll in her hand that she was leisurely reading. She didn’t want Hongqian to help wash her hair and managed to put up a loose cloud bun by herself. Her silky black hair was secured with a hairpin. A few side strands softly fell on her shoulders, highlighting the unspeakable elegance from her face caused by her refusal to eat. Seeing the two people enter the room, she raised her head and smiled lightly as acknowledgement before lowering her head to resume her reading.

Moran hadn’t expected her threat to be deliberate. If it was only a little unusual dramatic pastime, everything would’ve been fine. Coming today, he realised that the more comfortable Pingting appeared, the more agitated he was. Measuring his options, he told Hongqian, “Take care of her properly; I’ll be right back.”

He turned to go out of the room, instructing the guards outside the door to carefully watch over her. Grinding his teeth, he headed for Chu Beijie’s office.

Halfway, he collided with a person who laughed while asking, “General Chu sure is walking in a hurry. Where are you heading?”

Moran raised his head, and saw a familiar face he hadn’t seen for a long time pop into his view. “Zuiju? Why are you here? With all this heavy snow, the genius Doctor Huo actually let you come here?”

“I setted out early in the morning and arrived at noon. Didn’t dare pause on the way.” Zuiju wore a maid’s clothing and raised her head to look at the sky. “What ghastly weather. It just stopped snowing for a while just now. If it hadn’t been the Duke’s handwritten letter about an urgent request without delay, Teacher would have never let me out. Sigh, this year’s snow isn’t stopping and Teacher’s foot has begun to hurt again.”

“You’re…”

“The gossip can wait. I heard that you’re responsible for taking care of that infamous Miss Bai. Hurry up and tell me where she is.”

Zuiju studied under Dong Lin’s genius doctor, Huo Yunan, and learned about seventy or eighty percent of her teacher’s skills. Of course Moran understood why Chu Beijie would urgently request her and turned, saying, “Let’s talk on the way.” He led the way to Pingting’s residence, lowering his voice, “Hasn’t had food for two days and refuses to touch water too. Her body was weak to begin with, and when nighttime arrives, she doesn’t stop coughing!”

“Shh.” Zuiju waved her hand. They had arrived outside the room and peeked inside. As they turned, their eyebrows furrowed.

“It’s her?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Not good.”

Outside the building, the sounds of footsteps crunching in the snow were heard. The kitchen’s matron was carrying a food container into the atrium.

Hongqian bustled out of the side room, rubbing her hands nervously. “The food’s here?” As she received the container, she asked, “The Duke asked for a few Gui Le dishes too, have they been made?”

“Yes. Geez, for these few tiny dishes, the entire kitchen was turned upside down. How could it be easy to prepare Gui Le dishes in such a short time in this kind of place?” The matron raised her head and looked further into the room, whispering, “How is it now?”

The mention of this made Hongqian worry again. “How is it now? I’m worried to death, but she’s super relaxed. Let me tell you, according to the Duke, if something happens to her....” She pointed towards the main room inside, “not just me, but the entire kitchen’s lives are at stake.”

The matron paled.

“Leave this food container to me.” Behind the two people, an unfamiliar face suddenly popped out.

Hongqian was startled, clutched to her chest and jumped back. She hadn’t opened her mouth yet when Zuiju had taken the heavy food container off her. “The Duke has ordered that, from now on, I will look after Miss Bai. Hongqian is to remain here, to help me familiarise how serving works here. You can just call me Zuiju.”

Although Hongqian was shocked, but was happy to have someone replace the pressure of failure. She lowered her head, saying, “Yes.”

“The kitchen still has work to do, so I’ll get going. The food container does not have to be returned to the kitchen, as I’ll come to get it myself. Just put it on the table in the side room.” The matron hurriedly excused herself, then stepped into the thick snow, going back the way she came.

Moran walked towards them. “Take them to her, or the dishes will get cold.”

Zuiju nodded her head and headed for the main room. She pushed open the door with one hand, the other holding the food container. When she turned, she saw that Hongqian had followed her. She whispered, “You don’t have to come in, I’ll deal with her myself.”

Hongqian knew Pingting’s stubbornness, her immense ability to hold her opinion regardless of how much one cried or begged. But seeing Zuiju’s utter confidence, she wasn’t sure what to say. She gave her a look, nodded and went into the side room.

Zuiju lifted the curtain and stood at the door, not making any other steps. She just quietly observed Pingting reading on the couch.

It was a while before she walked towards the table and opened the food container. One by one Zuiji took out the dishes, still steaming hot.

Two meat dishes, two vegetable dishes, steamed chicken soup with cloud ears, a bowl of well-boiled rice porridge and four other Gui Le side dishes.

Ten things in total, completely covered in colour, flavour and taste. Each was mouthwatering.

Zuiju spread out the dishes, stood by the raised platform and carefully sat down. “Your servant, Zuiju, due to the Duke’s order, has specifically come to serve Miss Bai.”

Pingting continued to have her head lowered, reading. Her slightly drooping neck, delicate white skin, was undescribably touching.

“I know persuasive words have all been used by Hongqian already, and even if the food on the table is limited delicacy of the mountains or seas, Miss feels no desire to eat.” Zuiju slyly smiled, saying, “Miss’ desire is to simply have the Duke by Miss’ side. Due to the Duke’s temper, surely only an extreme measure of the last resort can soften it? To me, if it really becomes the last resort, even if the Duke agrees to come, Miss can no longer hold up either. This ‘I test you, you test me’ will be a waste of your life and cause grief to the Duke forever. Miss is a wise person, so why continue such a foolish act?”

Pingting’s gaze finally lifted off the book and swept towards Zuiju.

Zuiju saw her movement and went a little closer, intentionally lowering her voice. “Miss’ love for the Duke is very deep and can’t bear to leave the Duke alone right? You have to look after your body so that you can gain the Duke’s love in the future. I have a bottle of special medicine, a family secret recipe. Taking one can replace the meals for the day. As for the dishes on the table, Miss does not have to worry about them. Just return them the way you used to. Like this, in less than two days, the Duke will definitely be distressed and will naturally come to see Miss.”

She took out a small bottle from her arms and shook it at Pingting. “This act will not be detected by anyone, human, ghost or god. It is perfect to test the Duke’s thoughts towards Miss and does not damage your body. What does Miss think?”

Moran had hid himself behind the door. His hearing was above most people and heard about seventy-five percent of Zuiju’s words, which he thought were very clever.

To attack an opponent, one must attack the heart. This bottle of medicine was the perfect bait, making the future easier to deal with.

Pingting’s gaze remained soft throughout and as clear as dew. She stared at Zuiju for a long time before suddenly opening her mouth to speak, “Can you smell the scent of snow?” Due to the lack of food Pingting’s voice was very hoarse but still possessed an exciting charm that others lacked.

Zuiju was stunned, unsure of how to reply.

Pingting slowly turned away, her gaze resting towards the snowing sky where the sun tried to outrun the white face of the clouds.

She stretched her delicate eyebrows, carelessly slurring her words. “Only those who have pure hearts are able to smell the scent of snow. If you can’t resolve the feeling of sadness and continuously panic, then what’s the difference between life and death? I have already found the way to solve the problem of death so go tell the Duke that Pingting has never felt more relaxed than now.”

Zuiju remained dazed for a long time before putting the bottle back into her sleeves. She stood up, preparing to leave. Out the door, she looked up to see a surprised and frustrated Moran. She pursed her lips, “There’s nothing I can do but convince the Duke to come personally.”

Moran sighed helplessly. “Easier said than done, the Duke is even harder to convince than she is. I can only hope that he changes his mind in fear. How could you or I possibly bear his punishments?”

Relationships between men and women were truly scary, making such a wise person like the Duke fall into the pits of traps, putting their survival at great risk. This fatal attraction between two clever people resulted in too many setbacks.

Zuiju tried again. “If one place doesn’t work, then try the other place. Let me try.” Leaving Moran, she headed towards his office by herself.

Chu Beijie was in his office. He held a teacup in his hand, but he didn’t even drink a sip until the tea became cold.

Then suddenly, he heard someone outside. “Zuiju would like to see Duke.”

Chu Beijie abruptly stood up from his seat, before realising his actions were too impulsive. He returned to sitting down. He placed the cup back onto the table. “Come in.”

Zuiju walked into the office and bowed at Chu Beijie. “Duke, Zuiju has seen Miss Bai.”

“Still refusing to eat?”

“Yes.”

“How’s her body?”

“Judging by her face, not very well.”

Chu Beijie replied “Hm.” He asked using a deeper voice, “You haven’t gotten her pulse?”

“No.”

“Given her any medicine?”

“No.”

“Applied acupuncture yet?”

“No.”

Chu Beijie laughed coldly. “Your Teacher bragged about your cleverness, how you are able to determine a patient’s intentions so even psychiatric conditions are solved. Since you are not taking her pulse, giving medicine or applying acupuncture, I suppose you must have another way to help her?”

“Yes,” Zuiju replied respectfully, “Zuiju does have a way to help her.”

“Oh?” A dim light of interest flickered in Chu Beijie’s eyes. “Say, how do you plan to help her?”

Zuiju carefully thought this through for a while and then rapidly spat out, “If the Duke firmly refuses to see Miss Bia, then Zuiju’s best plan to help Miss Bai is to prepare poison for her, so she can part from this world without pain.” She paused and sighed. “No one can convince Miss Bai. From just one phrase, her words are not a threat or blackmail but something she feels comfortable about. She is waiting for Duke’s decision without resentment. A doctor’s heart is like a parent’s, so knowing that she’s a hopeless case, giving her poison is the happiest choice.”

Chu Beijie’s breathing stopped, his clenched fists loosened, then tightened again. He quietly asked, “What phrase?”

“She asked Zuiju if she could smell the scent of snow.” Zuiju’s expression was one of remembrance, “She said, only those who have pure hearts are able to smell the scent of snow.”

Chu Beijie suddenly stood up as if suddenly struck by lightning. For a long time, he appeared to be deep in thought. “Did she really say that?” he asked.

“Duke, you have to harden your heart and just let her go.”

The sentence was barely finished when Chu Beijie had already pushed open the heavy door curtain.

The chilling bitter wind gushed into the room, causing the scrolls of art to flap noisily against the wall.

Seeing Chu Beijie’s parting back view, Zuiju hid her smile. “See Teacher, I was right wasn’t I? The Duke is the one who’s sick.”

Stepping into the room, Chu Beijie seemed to be unable to move under Pingting’s gaze.

He had guessed many times, but he had never expected that Pingting would be waiting for him like this.

She was still lying on the couch, her upper body leaning against a cushion, her head softly placed on top of a pillow, revealing only half of her soft face to the outside.

A purple blanket covered her from the waist down, appearing to be increasingly fragile. A half-open scroll lay in her hand.

Everything was as still and beautiful as a masterpiece.

Her infinitely deep black eyes were gone, as she had closed her eyes. Her black yet long lashes perfectly rested on the tip of her lower eyelid.

Something resembling a serene smile escaped from her dry, cracked lips.

At that moment, Chu Beijie only had one thought in mind.

Pingting is gone.

She was no longer, and left with a smile.

His world split into countless pieces as if a beast had bared its fangs and swallowed the four seasons in whole.

Everything had ceased to exist whether it was the flowers of spring, the autumn moon, the summer cicadas or the winter snow. Colour was lost.

She was as faint as her chords and gradually dissipated.

Had already dissipated.

Chu Beijie was dazed like a clay statue, crumbling. Moran took a step forward to support Chu Beijie with a hand but was pushed away.

Hongqian happened to come into the room and saw Chu Beijie's figure. Her voice was a mixture of shock and happiness as she cried, "Miss, Miss Bai! The Duke is here to see you." She threw herself at Pingting, whispering, "Don't sleep any more, Miss, the Duke is here!"

She shook her a few times.

Chu Beijie watched the eyeballs under her skin moving a little before her eyelids slowly, silently opened little by little.

Those eyelids hid all of his world's colours. As they slowly opened, light came out of them. The wider her eyes, the more the hidden colours scattered out. The colour returned to the blankets, the couch, the pillow, the scroll in her hand and the blush on Hongqian's face that were once all white-gray.

It was as if a bright light was circled around Pingting, causing others to have trouble looking at her.

Chu Beijie finally found his four limbs, yet his mind was blank and his eyes were filled with the light. Thankfully his feet had a mind of their own and managed to seat him down at a table. He picked up a bowl of soup and sat next to the platform.

He did not know when, but Moran and Hongqian had already excused themselves.

Chu Beijie held the soup. Pingting blinked.

The two people did not hide the fact they were staring at each other.

"Duke..."

"Must you die?"

"Does Duke want Pingting to live?"

Chu Beijie pursed his thin lips, silently gazing at the soup in his hands.

“Don’t worry. If Duke doesn’t want to talk, then Pingting won’t force you.” Pingting struggled, wanting to sit up. “I’ll drink it myself.”

“No.” Without thinking, his hand had already pressed onto her thin shoulders, making her body involuntarily lie back down again. “I’ll do it,” he whispered these three words, picking up the spoon.

He carefully filled a spoonful and brought it to his own mouth, lightly blowing on it. Only then did he realise that the soup was not hot enough and he frowned as he turned to get someone to change it.

“It’s fine,” said the soft voice.

Chu Beijie turned back.

Her beautiful lips had a few cracks due to lack of water. This was like a cut to his heart.

“No, drink it warm for once.” He loudly spoke, “Send someone to the kitchen immediately and tell them to bring a new table of food.”

His tone left no doubts. The people outside replied ‘yes’ and hurriedly ran to pass on his order.

He put down the cold soup in his hands, his gaze unable to leave Pingting’s pale lips. His vigorous fingers went up to gently stroke the fine cracks.

“It’s cracked...” Chu Beijie murmured. He couldn’t help but put his hot tongue on her lips, moisturizing her dried wounds.

Pingting’s silent treatment was finally broken down. “Ah,” she cried in a low voice and turned away, surprised and ashamed, but Chu Beijie’s big, gentle yet firm hand pulled her back.

“Was life and death mine, including your honour?” He asked in a low voice.

The overbearing kiss was ferocious as an attack of the Dong Lin warriors he led, a truly firm one.

She was like fragile flowers on branches, unable to block the power of the wind.

Bai Pingting held her breath.

She helplessly placed and curled up her slender fingers on Chu Beijie’s clothing. Whether it was to push him away or to grasp onto him, no one knew.

The snow outside appeared to lessen and Pingting’s face grew dizzying hot.

She tried to open her eyes tighter and look at the light in Chu Beijie’s eyes a little better.

“Duke, the hot soup is here...”

Not only did hot soup come, but four heavy layers of food containers, each steaming hot.

Hongqian and Zuiju were peeping at their spring, two red clouds floating near their ears. They bit their lower lips as they busily arranged with much effort.

The kitchen was amazing. They had prepared so much in such a short notice.

Two meat and two vegetable dishes were placed in the middle of the table with all sorts of coloured dishes around them, like starry friends accompanying the bright moon. From red to orange to yellow to purple, all were brightly coloured.

Green onion flowers floated in the lotus and ham soup. In the freezing season of winter, it must have taken a while to find them.

Zuiju brought the soup bowl over and carefully lowered her head to blow a spoonful, which she then brought before Pingting.

“Miss Bai, the Duke is here already so please eat.”

“Just eat.”

Pingting refused to open her mouth, not making a sound.

Despite the fragrant soup before her, she seemed to be completely untempted.

After the forced kiss and Chu Beijie’s display of affection, he released the beauty in his arms, frowning. “What other conditions do you need?”

Pingting sucked her lip, a coldness hidden in her eyes as she undemandingly looked at Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie sat at the platform, feeling all of his organs burning under her gaze. More complex than complex, not in pain nor tired, yet overwhelmingly difficult to read.

How could he possibly let her have her own way? Chu Beijie widened his eyes, not saying a word, as he stared back at her.

His gaze sharpened.

The stronger his was, the weaker hers was. If one became more charming, the other became more delicate, revealing her intense stubbornness.

The more stubborn, the more adorable.

Chu Beijie’s heart softened. He couldn’t help but sigh.

In a battle of the two, it was not the stronger who would win.

No wonder it was often the gentle person who became a true hero.

“Open your mouth.” Chu Beijie was helpless, and took the bowl from Zuiju’s hands.

The moment his words rang out, smiling joy immediately surfaced from Pingting’s sad, pale face. Her pouty lips formed a smile of unlimited potential. Chu Beijie shook at the appearance of her smile. His hand that held so many swords could not stable itself, spilling drops of the hot soup onto the purple blanket.

“Drink it properly.” Chu Beijie lowered his voice, composing himself.

Laughter was hidden in the bottom of Pingting’s eyes. She obediently opened her mouth and swallowed a mouthful of the hot soup. The lotus was sweet; the ham was mellow.

“Blow it again,” she suddenly said.

“Eh?”

“Blow it again.” Her smile deepened, her dimples showing shyly. “It’s hot.”

The Chu Beijie who had commanded millions of soldiers had never guessed that he’d feel so powerless on this one day. He was literally sucking up to this insatiable woman. Each word put him completely to shame.

He stiffly bent down, blew until the soup was cold before clumsily bringing it to her lips.

Pingting obediently opened her mouth once again and drank the delicious lotus and ham soup. Leaning on the pillow, she chuckled, “This is the best soup I’ve ever had, doesn’t Duke agree?”

Chu Beijie replied bitterly to this, “How would I know?”

Pingting saw his stoic expression but couldn’t suppress her laugh. Seeing Chu Beijie with just a passing trace of exasperation, her scallion-like, white fingers of jade took the spoon off him. She filled it before carefully bringing it to his lips.

Chu Beijie looked at her.

Her eyes were completely clear, much like the fresh springs of hills, without a trace of impurity. This looked too sore and too sour in his eyes. He refused to open his mouth. With just this spoon, she had disappointed the skies, disappointed the most disappointing.

How despicable, how annoying!

He bit his lip tightly, but suddenly seemed to change his mind. His expression changed to one made at a decisive moment in a battle. He abruptly opened his mouth wide and stuffed the whole spoonful of soup into his mouth. His upper body uncontrollably pitched forward, one hand clutching firmly onto the soup bowl and other resting on Pingting’s shoulder, forcing his lips to hers.

What came over, other than soup, were also Chubeijie’s strength, intelligence, dominance and arrogance.

How could he so willingly agree to her conditions?

Pingting’s eyelashes trembled. She closed her eyes, her thin delicate arms wrapping around Chubeijie’s generously wide shoulders. Through gritted teeth she whispered, “From today onwards, if Duke is mean to Pingting, Pingting will be 100 times meaner to herself. No matter what, I only have one life, wasting it is fine too. Duke might as well give up.”

She was in Chu Beijie’s warm arms and felt his whole body stiffen as he muttered, “How many times do you plan to go against me?”

“A hundred times is not enough. Even a thousand times isn’t enough.” She answered in a very low voice, without a shred of apology.

Twice as angrier than before, Chu Beijie rose but was stopped by two slender arms wrapped around him. He looked down and saw tears had filled her face. Her teardrops delicately balanced on her ivory-like skin, falling yet not falling. Her snow white teeth tightly bit onto her bottom lip, refusing to let others hear the sound of her sobs.

Her bright profound eyes were not afraid of his sharp gaze, desolately earnest and ultimately they did not seem to be concealing hidden intentions.

His anger vanished immediately at that very moment like a hundred years of refined steel suddenly malleable once more.

“So hateful! So evil!” Chu Beijie hugged her tightly and seemed to want to plunge her into his own bones. “You’re so hateful Bai Pingting! Evil Bai Pingting....”

The sun hid behind the clouds; delicate snowflakes slowly drifted down once more.

It wasn’t a problem though. The room was incredibly warm. Although it was winter, the room seemed to be a landscape in spring.

Hongqian stole a look, blushing furiously. Her expression was immediately replaced with a frown. “You’ve messed up. The soup isn’t even finished. That isn’t good, is it?”

Zuiju smiled faintly. “There are people caring for Miss Bai’s body, so why should we? Come, since it’s snowing so wonderfully, we should quickly go into the yard and build a snowman.”

No longer caring the affectionate flirting in the house, the aftermath from battles of love and fate, everyone else looked outside, to the yard piled high with snow.

Dear Teacher, it seems that the Duke has fallen for such a pain-in-the-neck kind of girl.

Chapter 30

The invincible Duke of Zhen-Bei of the battlefields was defeated by the Bai Pingting who did not fear death.

He was not convinced nor willing to submit.

Just that when he looked into her two eyes, all of the displeasure and dissatisfaction disappeared.

Who told him to harden his heart or use ruthless means?

Who knew Pingting would expose such a beaming innocent smile from seeing his expression or by relaxing his brows, show even the slightest bit of compassion would result in so much in return, making it truly the world’s most worthwhile action?

Bai Pingting was as relaxed and free as a willow branch swaying in spring breeze. She felt merry. She understood that compromises were useless and, in all fairness, intended to take the initiative to recover from her eight months of suffering.

Until then she would get out of the bed to admire the snow.

Hongqian cleared out the pavilion and asked Moran to bring the qin, before fetching the alcohol.

Chu Beijie had yet to enter the room when he already heard the sound of qin floating through the walls.

He paused, narrowed his eyes and listened.

Distant and light: calm and happy

As free as clouds drifting, as strict the orbits of the moon and stars and an ample laziness that made anything seem possible with time.

Only mountains would stand quietly, straight and unyielding. Numerous small animals were on the mountain, not afraid of the wind and snow. The moment the snow stopped, out they came with snowball fights. They dug snow caves and picked the final few pinecones of a tree, forming a scene of fierce competition. What exhilaration!

Chu Beijie couldn't help himself, but he wanted to be closer to the qin sound. Proudly, he turned into the courtyard where there was a small pavilion, a guqin, good alcohol, some servants, and the incredibly merry, yet incredibly lazy woman who held his heart.

Ping! The qin sound was stopped by an abnormal noise.

Chu Beijie paled in shock. His mind raced as he flew into the pavilion. "What's wrong?"

Pingting lowered her head, holding her right hand. Her index finger had been sliced by the sudden break of the string, causing a single thin wound.

"Why are you so careless?" Chu Beijie's eyebrows were tightly knitted. He grabbed the soft hand. "Does it hurt?"

Hongqian peered behind Chu Beijie, hurriedly saying, "I will get the medicine."

Bright red blood slowly escaped from the fingertip, forming a thin stream. Chu Beijie's thundering expression was both from anger and frustration. "Why play qin on such a cold day?" He remained irritated by the red blood. He grabbed the white jade finger and placed it in his mouth, causing the taste of blood to melt in his mouth.

Pingting couldn't help laughing, her eyebrows forming crescent shapes as her wound was licked by Chu Beijie's fiery and moist tongue.

"Still laughing?" Chu Beijie's face darkened and used his imposing General attitude to suppress the surrounding air. "You mustn't be so careless next time." He let go of her finger, no longer bleeding, and grabbed her by the wrist. "Let's go into the room."

Pingting refused to budge.

Chu Beijie turned back to look at her. "Hm?" he asked with a frown.

Pingting's energetic eyes were rolling and lazily held up the other, perfectly intact index finger, "This one also wants to be kissed by the Duke."

The more she received, the more she wanted. It seemed that after a while, the dignified Duke of Zhen-Bei would become an incompetent fool who would only obey his wife?

Chu Beijie's expression darkened. "Quit messing around. Let's go inside..."

Before his words left his lips, Pingting's expression was replaced by a cold one. She placed her finger between her mouth and unhesitantly bit down hard.

"You..." Chu Beijie forcefully grabbed her other hand, but it was already too late. Her left hand that was once pretty and perfect had now met an unexpected calamity. It had deep teeth marks, cruelly betrayed by its owner.

Blood slowly oozed out from the teeth marks

“What was that for?” Chu Beijie was afraid of her doing stupid things again. He tightly held onto her hands. His eyebrows were locked in a tight frown as he grinded his teeth.

Pingting did not care her hands had been damaged and leaned into Chu Beijie’s arms as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Pfft.” She laughed.

Her face returned to its usual colour. She lifted her head and looked at Chu Beijie. “As long as Duke is worried about Pingting, what else matters even if these two hands go to waste and never play qin again?” Her voice was soft.

Her words were relaxed and calmed, without any hint of falsehood.

Chu Beijie’s heart was jolted. He held her fiercely to himself. In a low voice he ordered, “Your life and death, honour and disgrace are mine. You mustn’t neglect nor harm yourself. If you violate this, then I’ll punish you according to the army’s ways.”

The corners of Pingting’s eyes wavered and she took a deep breath in Chu Beijie’s arms. Looking into the depths of his eyes, she replied, “The army’s ways are harsh, so Pingting will surrender herself.”

Leaning against Chu Beijie’s chest, feeling his strong muscles ripple, she felt the powerful force that belonged to him.

Pingting closed her two eyes, lightly sucking her lip. “Swallows bring fortune, but too much fortune brings damage. A joy to look, a joy to look...”

Chu Beijie listened while hugging what seemed to be the world’s most fragile treasure, that was also the most likely to vanish.

A trace of a sweet smile escaped from his manly face.

It was the Zhen-Bei Ducal Prefecture like back then, when Pingting was still in his arms, singing beautiful songs.

The song was there, the melody was there and the person was there.

The sun, stars and moon were there; the sky and earth were there.

The Bai Pingting in his arms remained.

From that day on, Pingting’s clear singing was often heard from the small pavilion.

Listening and listening to the tactful, moving music, made others jealous of the man by her side, hugging her.

To Hongqian, these changes were a mixture of surprise and delight. She quietly told Zuiju, “See? Because of their grudge, they were literally at each other’s throat. Now that it’s all resolved, it’s as great as now. The Duke is a famous general, but to the woman he loves, he had to admit defeat too. Sigh, as expected—even amazing people become softhearted when in love.”

Zuiju deftly prepared Pingting’s food and turned to see Hongqian leaning in the doorway, watching the two people snuggling by the lake. “The Duke is a strong opponent, yet Miss Bai is an opponent of another league. I really wonder how the skies have brought these two to collide,” she exclaimed.

Hongqian turned around. "But it's the collision that makes life interesting. Who else apart from Miss Bai is a suitable woman for our Duke?"

Zuiju lightly replied, "Observers may find this amusing, but no person of the loop ever knows how many hardships lie ahead. Have you already forgotten about the incident of the two princes?"

Mentioning the two princes of Dong Lin, Hongqian could no longer laugh either. She looked beyond Zuiju.

Zuiju turned around to see Moran standing expressionlessly behind her.

"Don't mention that again." Moran coldly replied.

"Yes."

Zuiju answered, and glanced at the silhouette of the two figures.

Does not mentioning mean you could forget?

Pingting fully enjoyed Chu Beijie's love, after enduring eight months of silent treatment. Looking at Chu Beijie's begrudging yet utterly helpless expression, she dearly loved the darkness it casted on his face. Despite all his superiority, he personally made the porridge and fed her the medicine. Putting down all of his work, Chu Beijie accompanied her to see the sunrises, sunsets, and the movement of the stars and moon.

Many of her wishes had been granted. She leaned in his arms, listening to the winter snow. She asked him to pick the most beautiful plum blossom in the residence, and to put it in her hair.

Everything was a perfect dream, a dream floating on a gray shadow. Pingting and Chu Beijie indulged themselves to ignore the shadow that must never be forgotten.

"Pingting has done something very stupid."

"Oh?" Chu Beijie felt the chill of the night, but she cried that she wanted to watch the stars. He had to open the window. While holding her tightly, he casually asked, "For example?"

"For example, to the Duke..." In the middle of her sentence, she closed her small lips, her bright eyes looking thoughtfully at Chu Beijie. Then she laughed self-deprecatingly, "I have a very stupid wish."

Chu Beijie lowered his head and examined her. "How stupid?"

Pingting shifted her gaze towards the shadows casted by the trees in the bright half-moon. For a while, she remained silent before saying, "Stupid that I want the Duke to not change his mind about me, regardless the hundreds and thousands of twists and turns beyond." There was a trace of a bitter smile as she whispered, "The clever Bai Pingting, the stupid Bai Pingting, the kind Bai Pingting and the evil Bai Pingting...will always be the Bai Pingting loved by the Duke?"

There was no expression on Chu Beijie's face, but the colour on his face gradually darkened. "Don't say any more." He reached out and shut away the colour and light of the starry sky. He firmly, yet gently, pushed Pingting onto a soft mattress.

"It's too cold. Go to sleep soon."

He undid Pingting's clothing proficiently and took off her heavy coat, revealing the white silk garment underneath. With a wave of his hand Pingting was wrapped up in a blanket leaving only her face exposed. He himself undressed

in a few moments and wriggled into the bundle. He grabbed her thin waist, allowing the side of Pingting's face to rest on his chest.

"Duke..."

"Sleep obediently. Don't think about useless things."

In a huff, he blew out the last lit candle in the room.

The inky black eyes full of wisdom were not closed but full of light melancholy.

The two stuck tightly to each other, listening to the other's heartbeats –the sound of flowing blood.

"Cough...cough cough..."

"What?" Chu Beijie's strong and sturdy body moved, his hand moving towards Pingting's forehead.

"Noth...cough cough cough cough..." Pingting tried to muffle her cough.

"Your prescription doesn't seem to work. A few doses have made it even worse. I'll get Zuiju to look at you. Even if you don't trust in the skill of those doctors, there's no way you don't trust in Huo Yunan's disciple." Chu Beijie said while propping himself off the bed, preparing to call Zuiju.

Pingting also lazily sat up, stopping him. "Even if I do need to see one, seeing one right now makes no difference. Why not tomorrow? If we do something so chaotic, I'll have even more difficulty sleeping."

Chu Beijie carefully studied her eyebrows, which indeed had a hint of sleep. He nodded, cuddling her to sleep once more. He ordered, "You must sleep properly, and don't think any more useless things."

Charcoal crackled as it burned in the furnace.

Pingting closed her eyes and obediently went to sleep.

The next day, Zuiju was summoned in the early morning. Entering the room, she saw there was no one on Pingting's currently favourite couch, so she simply stood out in the atrium until she heard Chu Beijie's deep voice saying, "We're inside."

Zuiju went in.

Chu Beijie was already up and fully dressed. There was a fine layer of sweat on his forehead as if he been practicing his swordsmanship. Pingting was still lying on the bed and tried to get up when she saw Zuiju entering. Chu Beijie stopped her. "When I wanted her to come yesterday night, you stubbornly refused. Now that you're like this, you still try to pointlessly move about? Lie down obediently and let Zuiju take your pulse."

Zuiju stepped forward and sat by the bed. She smiled at Pingting, "Rest assured, Miss Bai, my Teacher says I am proficient in the field." She reached out her hand into the warm blankets, gently grasping Pingting's wrist and brought it out.

Before she could intently listen to her pulse, she was interrupted by a gust of wind from the opening door. The door curtain was suddenly lifted and Moran appeared at the doorway, his expression serious. "Duke, a private letter from the Royal House."

Chu Beijie's thick eyebrows rose in surprise. "A private letter from the Royal House?"

“The King’s private letter.”

Chu Beijie’s expression was suddenly serious. His waist straightened like a javelin. “Go to the office,” he instructed Moran.

He took two steps before turning back to Zuiju. “Take her pulse properly, administer medicine carefully and determine the root of her sickness. Her general health isn’t too good, so don’t use strong medicines.” Then he strode out in large steps, hurriedly leaving.

The two entered the office at different times. When Moran entered the room, he quickly shut the door behind him and took out the letter from his sleeves.

Chu Beijie took it, observing the royal seal. There were a few tiny words written on the letter: “Confidential to Beijie”. Indeed, this letter was from his only brother, personally written by the King of Dong Lin. Ominously, his heart thumped. Because of the poisoning of the two princes, he had led a raging storm through the capital, a mutiny full of battle-hardened soldiers. The ordeal ended with parting from the King of Dong Lin dejectedly.

After such bitter misfortune, unless it was the last resort, there was no way the King of Dong Lin would send a personal letter.

Chu Beijie and the King of Dong Lin were born from the same mother, and the two brothers had been intimate from childhood. One made the decisions of a King, while the other loyally led troops to defend the country, their feelings completely without friction. Although Chu Beijie had angrily and heartbreakingly sworn a life of seclusion, the ties of flesh and blood override hearts. How could he not worry about his brother, in the faraway capital, after such an urgent letter?

Chu Beijie broke open the seal, unfolded the letter and read it attentively.

The letter was not long and was undoubtedly written by the King of Duke without scribes. The more Chu Beijie read, the dire his expression became. Moran couldn’t help becoming increasingly worried. He waited breathlessly.

Chu Beijie read the entire letter and held his hands behind his back. It was a long time before he replied, “Yun Chang and Bei Mo have formed an alliance and sent three hundred thousand soldiers to pressure my Dong Lin’s borders.”

Moran had accompanied Chu Beijie on the battlefield through fire and water, so he fully understood the military strength of the four countries. The Bei Mo army was clearly not strong in battle a year earlier. The Yun Chang who’ve always occupied a corner was surprising since they had a lot of potential due to their constant neutrality. He thought for a while before asking, “Which general has Yun Chang sent to command the troops?”

Although Chu Beijie’s expression was heavy, he still managed to give him a pleased look, “Moran really does get straight to the point. There’s a great improvement.” A light flashed in his eyes as he spat, “He Xia.”

“He Xia?” Moran had already guessed this a little, but he couldn’t help but frown when hearing Chu Beijie’s reply. “His strength and strategies are extremely good. I’m afraid that on Duke has the ability to rival him. Hmph, Yun Chang has finally sent out their Prince Consort. I’m afraid that Miss Bai...”

“Pingting doesn’t know anything.” Chu Beijie replied, “She doesn’t need to have any contact with these kind of things any more.”

Moran nodded in agreement. “Indeed.” He then thought back to Dong Lin’s military affairs and hesitated before saying, “Even though the army borne of Yun Chang and Bei Mo’s alliance is said to be three hundred thousand in

reality there is only at most one hundred and fifty thousand. With the current strength of Dong Lin's army with Duke accompanying them, coupled with Duke's former, special group of warriors, there is enough to resist the enemy."

Chu Beijie's gaze was far away. There was a slightly bitter smile on his handsome, angular face. "I never thought that my Dong Lin who has conducted wars and pressured other countries' borders would have its own border pressured one day? It seems that it was indeed my greatest fault in not capturing Bei Mo's capital in one fell swoop. As a result, they've allied with Yun Chang."

Moran immediately closed his mouth, refusing to say anything.

Bai Pingting had damaged the Battle of Bei Mo. The process had been complex. Moran knew what had happened, better than anyone else. Bai Pingting was Chu Beijie's Achilles heel.

Chu Beijie's expression was enigmatic and held no clues to decipher.

A tense atmosphere filled the room, causing breathlessness to the people inside. Moran waited anxiously before forcing himself to ignorantly change the subject. "The enemy is advancing step by step, and the opposing general is the widely acclaimed He Xia. Without Duke's commands, I'm afraid my Dong Lin's army will not be able to resist very long. Does Duke plan to immediately return to the capital and prepare for war?"

Chu Beijie's large back straightened, determined. There was a faint hint of his heroic, influential battlefield style as he sneered, "I may be living in seclusion, but the country is in trouble and He Xia is harming my Dong Lin. How can I just sit back and watch? I shall set off immediately."

Moran hesitated, not knowing how to react. Chu Beijie turned around, "I shall rush to the capital by horse, to see my Brother."

"Duke?"

Chu Beijie waved a hand to stop Moran, commanding, "It's enough to have me on the battlefield. You lead the guards to protect this place and protect Pingting." His tone lowered as he looked out the window, at the morning light in the east. In a cold voice he added, "The Queen has never forgotten her hatred for the assassination of her two sons, so she must have secretly sent some spies here, waiting for the opportunity to harm Pingting. You should know what to do."

Moran replied in order, "I have also sent spies to them beforehand. The Queen's spies are good in skill but few in number. The remaining guards, both in number and skill, are enough to deal with them. I am just a little worried that after the Duke is gone, perhaps the Queen will decide to fully eradicate Miss Bai and mobilise the army..."

"Can she mobilise the army of Dong Lin to attack my residence?" Chu Beijie's deep voice was full of confidence. "That is also the reason I want you to stay. As long as you stand at the front door, what general dares to act rashly?"

That was true as no one dared to go against Chu Beijie in the army. Moran was the most trusted confidant, making him the best representative of Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie lifted his head, seemingly thinking deeply about something. His gaze swept lightly across the wall, before walking forwards and picking up the precious sword that never left his side on the battlefield. He held it in his palm, touching it gently.

Inside another building.

A trace of surprise leaked from Zuiju's eyes.

Zuiju removed her fingers from Pinotino's wrist before directing her sparkling bright eyes to look at Pinotino

There was smile in Pingting's lips, one full of sweetness that could not be easily dispersed. She nodded gently.

Zuiju sucked in a long breath, whispering, "When did you know?"

"When I grew suspicious, I took my own pulse."

"No wonder you refused to let the doctor take your pulse." Zuiju studied her deeply before sighing, "Miss, you messed around far too much. You knew yet still did something like refusing to eat. If the Duke was really heartless, then wouldn't two lives have died in vain?" She shook her head in disapproval, asking again, "Does the Duke know?"

Pingting hadn't always been a romantic yet now she was unusually shy. She lowered her voice, "Can I personally tell him?"

Zuiju thought a little and nodded her head. "Fine. But let me tell Miss first, you have already ruined your body enough. From now on, you have to be carefully nursed back to health and eat a proper diet, all under my instructions. You mustn't play qin in the snow or stargaze in the cold wind. If you don't listen to me, I will get the Duke to come over and have him ban you from moving. You will not even be allowed get out of the bed."

The more she said, the more serious she was. Pingting couldn't help laughing and softened her voice, "Understood. Pingting knows she was wrong."

Her voice was melodious, and her posture was elegant. She had a faint smile, her brows and eyes relaxed. With her soft words, Zuiju couldn't continue to scold her but helplessly shake her head in exasperation.

In her heart, Zuiju sighed, as she realised that this was what a charming, unrivalled beauty was like. When they were finally in role, they were unstoppable unmatched romantics that could not be resisted by anyone.

She had the ability to make Chu Beijie happy and the ability to make Chu Beijie worried. Zuiju was still sighing to herself when a glimpse of Chu Beijie entering the room made her hurriedly stand up.

"Duke's here."

"Have you taken her pulse?" Chu Beijie asked, "How is her sickness?"

Zuiju's eyes flicked towards Pingting, replying, "Nothing much, she just has to carefully restore her health back. Zuiju will now leave to prescribe the medicine." She left the room, giving Pingting an opportunity to be alone with Chu Beijie.

Pingting leaned on the bed, her eyes following Chu Beijie's every movement. She watched Chu Beijie lean towards her. He revealed a more delighted smile than usual. She took the initiative and tugged at Chu Beijie's sleeve, saying, "Sit here Duke, Pingting has something to tell you."

As Chu Beijie sat down, Pingting's gaze fell on the sword on his hand. "Is the Duke going to practice? Why are you holding onto your precious sword?" she asked curiously.

"I'm going to hurry back to the capital." Chu Beijie looked deeply into the eyes of the most beautiful woman and handed the sword to her. "Do you still recognise this sword? I have two swords, one is Parting Soul, which has been given to He Xia to symbolise the five-year truce to Gui Le. This is Divine Spirit, a set with Parting Soul."

When Pingting heard that Chu Beijie was going to leave, her face was wiped of its original joy. She took the heavy sword, lowered her head to stare at the exquisite patterns on the scabbard and was speechless.

Chu Beijie then said, "It is remote here, so I leave Moran and the guards here to protect you. If...if the unthinkable happens here, send someone by a fast horse with this sword to the Dragon Tiger Barracks twenty miles north of here and ask General Chen Mu to help. He recognises my sword."

When he finished, he saw that Pingting's face was full of loneliness. He raised his large, rough hands smoothing the hair on her forehead. "Why so silent?"

Pingting placed the Precious Divine Spirit Sword down and slowly leaned towards Chu Beijie's chest, deeply breathing as if trying to draw strength from there. A moment passed before she asked in a lowered voice, "Is the Duke going to war? Who dares to attack Dong Lin?" She felt Chu Beijie stiffen slightly and immediately reached out, covering his mouth. She raised her head towards him, "Duke doesn't need to explain to Pingting. Pingting is no longer concerned about anything apart from Duke now."

Chu Beijie saw this as delicate and charming. He couldn't help but tightly hug her. He lowered his voice, "Didn't you have something to tell me?"

Pingting calmly watched him for a while, asking, "Pingting passed her birthday alone, so as for Duke's birthday, could we be together?"

Chu Beijie was born on the sixth of the first lunar month, leaving only fifteen days. If he had to rush back to make it on a fast horse, he could spend no longer than four days at the Royal Residence.

As the same time, the situation of the army and borders were unknown, Chu Beijie could not easily determine whether he could get away from the Royal Residence in just four days.

He didn't want to disappoint Pingting, so he remained silent without answering.

Pingting did not mind this, her eyes hiding warm laughter. She raised her head towards Chu Beijie, "Duke is a natural general. Eleven days is enough to travel to and from the Royal Residence and four days is enough for Duke to gain favour with the King's troops. Pingting is not greedy, just hoping that Duke will come to see Pingting once before heading out to the battlefield. On Duke's birthday, Pingting wants to tell Duke something very important."

Chu Beijie's heart thumped, asking, "Something important? Can't you tell me now?"

The white and black parts of Pingting's eyes revealed a little stubbornness and obstinacy. She shook her head, "It's something very important and must be said on an unforgettable and auspicious day."

Chu Beijie was about to ask more, when Moran had already marched into the room, reporting, "Duke, everything has been prepared."

He then studied the figure in the room, carefully asking, "Perhaps you would like to set off at a later time?"

"No, I must set off immediately." Chu Beijie released Pingting and placed her on her pillow. He watched her undoubtedly beautiful black hair spread out. A look of pity appeared on his chiselled face. He finally opened his mouth, "I'll try to hurry back soon."

Seeing infinite joy suddenly replacing the deep gaze of her bright eyes, he turned and stepped out of the door.

The best horse, fed with the best grain, was already tipping and tapping outside the entrance.

Chu Beijie launched himself onto the horse, his blazing eyes sweeping towards Moran.

Moran gritted his teeth and heavily nodded back

Chu Beijie then lowered his gaze and called towards the staying guards. "I shall go to the Royal Residence to receive the King's commands. I will return before heading towards the border to handle the troops there. Everyone, make sure to guard properly. Do not make any mistakes!"

All of the guards were borne of the battlefield and each was a battle-hardened veteran. Hearing enemy soldiers threatening their country made their veins boil. The moment Chu Beijie spoke, morale boomed and everyone thundered "yes".

Chu Beijie faintly smiled and whipped the horse, causing the four hooves to quicken and blow away the snow.

A back view full of arrogant pride seemed even more noticeable further away than near.

Pingting remained in the room, calmly propping herself to a sit.

She heard the distant cries beyond the way, and her eyebrow fretted slightly. She knew that Chu Beijie had departed, leaving her heart empty.

"Does the Duke know?"

She lifted her head, only realising that Zuiju had entered the room some time ago.

"The sixth of the first lunar month is his birthday, I will tell him on that day."

Zuiju was puzzled and her voice was a little anxious. "It's already good enough if Miss tells the Duke, why on earth would you drag it to the sixth of the first lunar month? Sigh, why is it that the more intelligent a person, the more mysteries they like to make? If this goes on, something is going to happen even if nothing is supposed to happen."

Pingting frowned, shaking her head. "I don't know why but the Duke suddenly said that he had to immediately return to the capital. I suddenly worried. I'm really scared that something terrible will happen in Dong Lin's capital. In the critical moments, the Duke may have to make dangerous decisions, meaning the fewer considerations, the better. It's better not to tell the Duke the news of my pregnancy. Let's not add to his worries," she replied thoughtfully.

Zuiju surprisedly measured Pingting's expression. She relaxed her voice, "Moran once said that Miss has the sight of a thousand miles. Listening to Miss' tone, perhaps you already have some clues about what is happening?"

"Clues about what?" Pingting's smile was wry. "I have been without news of the outside world for a long time now."

Yangfeng's last letter only mentioned that she and Ze Yin had gone into a life of seclusion with no other details.

Perhaps Yangfeng didn't want to tire her body and mind by participating in those annoying battles for power.

Bei Mo had been at war with both Dong Lin and Gui Le once, resulting in massive damage to the troops. Until now, the only country that had the potential to challenge Dong Lin was Yun Chang which had always been outside the picture.

However, why did Yun Chang shift from its national policy of defense and non-attack towards threatening the powerful military of Dong Lin?

She turned back and saw Zuiju, a gentle smile escaping from her face. "Don't worry, no matter what happens, there are two things I'm absolutely sure about."

Zuiju couldn't help asking, "Which two?" after hearing her soft voice full of confidence.

"First, no matter how powerful the enemy is, the Duke can still gain victory."

Zuiju agreed with this point and she nodded. "Then the second?" she asked again.

"The second?" Pingting's eyes brightened, revealing a hint of pride. "No matter where the Duke is, as long as I am in danger, he will definitely come back to me in time."

Zuiju was stunned.

Why did this smart, tough girl who tested the Duke over and over again put so much confidence in the Duke's affection at this time?

Pingting approved of Zuiju's stunned expression, revealing two shallow dimples. She lazily stretched out, "As long as these two points are guaranteed, why should I waste energy on other things? Ah, Zuiju, you must look after the child properly in my tummy so when the Duke returns, I can tell him the good news super healthy and glowing."

Zuiju answered and went outside to look at the herbs she had brewed for Pingting. When she reached the courtyard, she happened to see Moran who had just sent off Chu Beijie.

Moran said, "The Duke has left. Why is your expression so strange? Has anything happened to Miss Bai?"

Her expression was a little nervous.

Zuiju shook her head and seriously thought for a while, revealing an expression exclusive to teenage girls. She faintly sighed, "I now understand that a woman finding the man of her dreams is something seriously reassuring."

She sighed consecutively several more times, both sentimentally and enviously. She then went to see the herbs, leaving behind a baffled Moran.

Chu Beijie was on the roads on a fast horse, moving rapidly away from the secluded area like an agile pigeon flapping its wings in the sky.

This general, one who shook the four countries, was soon away from the mountains and forests of seclusion, bringing his distinguished presence back into the world once more.

At Dong Lin's Royal Residence, the majestic King of Dong Lin slowly paced back and forth in the, accompanied by only four personal maids. The Queen of Dong Lin stopped her track at the wooden door and held her maids back, entering alone.

"King," she slowly sat on the Dong Lin King's bed, looking at her husband's face. The Queen of Dong Lin asked, her voice full of concern, "Does King not feel better after eating the genius Doctor Huo's pills?"

The King of Dong Lin let out a comforting smile and held the Queen's wrist, "Sorry I made my Queen worry." His gaze shifted towards the empty doorway, "Any news from my Brother?"

"I just received the news. The Duke of Zhen-Bei has already left and will soon arrive at the capital." The Queen relayed the news from the reporting letter. "He did not take any men and left alone. I have already ordered the Senior Official to pass on the instructions to the town officials, so they can properly look after of him."

She paused before lowering her eyes. "The Duke of Zhen-Bei as expected left Pingting behind."

“It’s because he doesn’t want to hurt you. He doesn’t want Bai Pingting to appear before us, therefore has reluctantly left his woman behind.” The King of Dong Lin coughed twice, his pale face revealing an unnatural shade of red. His eyes darkened, “Has everything been prepared?”

The Queen nodded, helplessly sighing. She softly comforted him, “Don’t blame yourself, King. Any member of the royal family would consider it an honor to sacrifice themselves for the country.”

Even though she said this, her always dignified and unemotional face couldn’t help reveal a trace of sadness.

The massive battles of Gui Le and Bei Mo had caused some loss to Dong Lin’s military power, but it was Chu Beijie’s retirement to a life of seclusion after leading a mutiny that had delivered a huge blow on the once-powerful country of Dong Lin.

Had Chu Beijie completely given up his military power and continued his life of seclusion, it would be difficult to measure the extent of the cracks in Dong Lin’s power.

But even so, the morale of the Dong Lin’s army had been shaken.

In just one short year, the power of the four countries had shifted and shockingly, the one who had gradually profited the most from this shift of military power had been the new Prince Consort of Yun Chang, He Xia.

This alliance between the armies of Yun Chang and Bei Mo had resulted in three hundred thousand enemy soldiers approaching menacingly. Although Dong Lin had always been a country of dominance, they had been at loss for once, giving birth to the emotion of fear.

The Queen of Dong Lin had intercepted He Xia’s handwritten confidential letters. The three hundred thousand troops that were arriving just wanted a single woman.

Just a woman.

Just a...Bai Pingting.

The woman who murdered her two juvenile sons, the woman who Chu Beijie hated to bits yet loved to bits seemed to be the saviour of Dong Lin at the moment.

Wasn’t that truly ironic?

Wasn’t that truly embarrassing?

It was such a bizarre thing, yet there was no room for doubt on He Xia’s personally written letter, covered with the official seal of Yun Chang, including Princess Yaotian’s handwritten initials.

The King of Dong Lin summoned his most trusted officials before discussing by the bedside.

“The Duke of Zhen-Bei refuses to hand over Bai Pingting.”

“My Brother will fight and win this war for us.”

“King,” The Senior Official, Chu Zairan, knelt down. His words were direct and full of pain, “With the current enemy’s troops, even if the Duke of Zhen-Bei can win, it will be a bloody battle. Dong Lin’s soldiers will suffer innumerable casualties.”

The King of Dong Lin studied the elderly officials that had accompanied them for so many years, not making any sound.

For all those young men's lives, his Dong Lin's Royal House and the officials that protected them, it was just not worth it for just a single woman even if it was the dearest woman to Chu Beijie.

If Chu Beijie was still Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei, then he should know that it wasn't worth it.

"Queen..."The King of Dong Lin called his much-worn wife in the chambers, at the dead of the night.

He watched the resolute and noble expression on the Queen's face for a long time. The King of Dong Lin then sighed, "I know that the Queen has sent troops to camp near Brother's secluded residence and have prepared to ambush them to avenge your murdered—our murdered—children."

The Queen's expression did not change as she frankly replied, "Yes."

"But the Queen has never sent the order to do so."

The Queen laughed self-deprecatingly, her expression dark. "After all, she is the most beloved woman of the Duke of Zhen-Bei. If I really ordered them to do it, then the brotherhood between King and the Duke of Zhen-Bei will be completely drained away. He...is not only King's own younger brother but also the protector of Dong Lin as the Duke of Zhen-Bei. He is Dong Lin's moat that is unable to be attacked. No matter how ignorant I am, I would not destroy this country's supporting column for my own feelings."

The King of Dong Lin had been married to her for many years and knew she was thinking of their two dead sons. A knife pierced his heart. He grabbed her soft body in his arms, holding tightly. "Don't worry Queen, I know."

How could Chu Beijie, his brother, Dong Lin's greatest general, the Duke of Zhen-Bei that shook the four countries, forgive the woman who poisoned the young Dong Lin princes?

The Queen turned away, holding back her tears. She calmly asked, "He Xia has kept his word and has retreated ten miles away from the border, awaiting further news. Has the King decided yet?"

The King of Dong Lin closed his eyes and thought for a long time. When he finally opened his eyes, he said, "Send out a letter, allowing He Xia and his men towards Brother's secluded residence and take away Bai Pingting. As for the capital, make Brother stay at the Royal Residence at all costs until Bai Pingting is taken away."

The King of Dong Lin's personal letter was then sent to Chu Beijie, who had been deep in love with Bai Pingting, and just like that, made the Chu Beijie, who could not forget the matters of his country, reluctantly leave Bai Pingting's side.

Chu Beijie had already left and arrived at the outskirts of the capital by daytime. He had no idea that every step of the horse he rode danced closer towards the palm of the Royal House who knew everything, closer towards the palm of his only brother, the King of Dong Lin.

In the Royal Residence, the two were unattended.

The Queen looked at the increasingly sickly King of Dong Lin and finally asked the question the officials were afraid to mention before him.

"When the enemy soldiers retreat and the Duke of Zhen-Bei learns that Bai Pingting has been taken away by He Xia's men, how should we explain to him?"

The King of Dong Lin's face was drained of colour. Despite his melancholy, there was a likeness to Chu Beijie's strong determination. With the certainty and pride suitable to a King, he replied, "No need for an explanation. As long as he is my Brother, as long as he is still the Duke of Zhen-Bei, as long as he still has a trace of the fiery blood of Dong Lin's Royal House, then he should understand how to face and choose in the best interests of this country."

The Royal House was one that gave up their own spirit by replacing it with their country and its people.

No matter how beloved the woman, it was not as important as a patch of Dong Lin's barren soil. Just as the King of Dong Lin was upset over losing his sons, the cost of losing Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei was much too great.

He could never forget that Chu Beijie, his only Brother, was forever the Dong Lin's battlefield's representative, the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

Until then, day and night, Chu Beijie passionately listened to Pingting's leisurely singing in her room.

They had no idea that that a life of seclusion was never one for them to have.

Power, war, strategy, and even affection made up the complicated woven web that now lay before them.

Chapter 31

Chu Beijie arrived at the capital in the misty, early hours of the morning.

In the distance, the tall city entrance stood, majestic and yet imposing, seeming both familiar yet distant. Beijie squinted and stared for a long time before finally riding forward to meet his welcoming party and dismounting.

"Duke!"

"Our Duke is back!"

"The Duke of Zhen-Bei is finally back!"

The welcoming party not only included government officials but also the many peasants of the city who crowded on both sides of the road. Their mighty general has finally returned.

Their eyes sparkled with endless joy. Only the few high-ranking Dong Lin officials knew the hidden agenda of this occasion and quietly looked away, staying calm and collected, trying desperately to hide the anxiety that would no doubt be present in their eyes.

The head of the welcoming party was Chu Zairan, a court elder and highly respected Dong Lin official. He stood at the front, leading the countless officials behind him and paid his respects to Chu Beijie, "Duke has finally returned to us." Nothing could conceal the joy and excitement in his wise, old eyes.

"Senior Official." Chu Beijie gestured for the loyal official, who had given up most of his life to serve his country, to rise. Handing his reins to an attendant behind him, Chu Beijie stepped forward and asked, "How is the situation?"

"Not good." Chu Zairan and Chu Beijie strode towards the palace, nodding to acknowledge the cheers of the peasants, "The King has fallen ill."

“Brother?” Chu Beijie froze for a moment before continuing his strides forward. With a furrowed brow he solemnly asked, “How did this happen?”

“Ever since Duke’s departure to live in seclusion, the King has been unwell. His chest pain has become unbearable. He isn’t able to fall asleep at night. He’s been lingering on his deathbed more many days now.” Chu Zairan’s voice was heavy with sorrow, “Even without the looming war with Yun Chang , Bei Mo and their armies pressing against our borders, I would have begged for Duke’s return.”

Chu Beijie felt his heart sinking.

Meanwhile, news of Chu Beijie’s departure from his secluded residence had already reached a certain residence deep in the mountains near Bei Mo’s borders.

Yangfeng suddenly raised her head and gazed at Ze Yin with a stricken look, “He Xia’s armies are pressed against the borders yet Chu Beijie would actually leave Pingting behind and head to the capital by himself?”

Ze Yin nods solemnly and replied, “Yes.”

“Oh God!” Yangfeng painfully exclaimed, falling into the mahogany chair behind her, clutching the handle desperately and hiding her face. “Pingting must not have told Chu Beijie the truth of what happened yet, otherwise he would never have left her there to avoid rousing suspicion. He must still believe that He Xia and Pingting are still master and servant and has no idea what He Xia had done to her.”

Ze Yin watched, his heart breaking at the sight of his beloved wife suffering, and ordered servants to bring out their innocent and carefree infant son. Gently placing the baby into Yangfeng’s arms, he cradled her. “Chu Beijie is a true hero and a man among men; he will definitely protect his woman.”

Yangfeng pressed the back of her soft and small hands against Ze Yin’s palms and mournfully uttered, “I can never forget the look on Pingting’s face when she talked about He Xia right before she left. I just don’t understand, how could our King be so —for mere riches—ally himself with He Xia and send his armies to Dong Lin? Doesn’t he realise what would happen by enraging Chu Beijie?” She suddenly stopped in realisation and looked up at her Ze Yin’s comforting gaze and asked, “Why are you so calm? Does my dear husband see something else in this situation?”

Ze Yin felt great unease regarding the situation, realising Yangfeng was staring at him awaiting his reply. He solemnly acknowledged her, “When the allied armies arrived at the border, He Xia immediately commanded them to retreat 10 miles. From this I believe He Xia doesn’t intend to go to war against Dong Lin but instead wants to use the armies to threaten Dong Lin in order to obtain something.”

Yangfeng gazed at her husband, her glistening black eyes unblinking, waiting for him to continue.

Ze Yin sighed, “If Chu Beijie returns and leads his army against the allied troops, it is inevitable that both sides will suffer heavy losses.”

The meaning behind his words were very clear.

Whatever his request, the King of Dong Lin would have to comply or else risk suffering heavy losses in war.

What could He Xia possibly desire that the King of Dong Lin would definitely give up?

Yangfeng stiffened at her realisation.

With her eyes widening and heart skipping out of rhythm, Yangfeng clutched desperately at Ze Yin's robes, the joints in her hands whitening at the tightness of her clenched fist.

"Pingting!" She cried out, looking at Ze Yin, "He wants Pingting!"

Ze Yin lowered his head. Looking at his beloved's pale face, he slowly nodded.

"Why?" Yangfeng spat out between clenched teeth, "Has he not done enough yet to her? That cruel-hearted He Xia." Anger bubbling in her chest, she suddenly stood up looking out the window at the snowcovered mountains before her.

She must not allow Pingting to be hurt again.

Taking a few deep breaths of the cold wintery air, still facing the window with her back to him, Yangfeng composed herself and sweetly asked Ze Yin, "Would my dear husband please grant me a favour?"

"Do you wish for me to write a letter to Pingting?"

"No." Yangfeng turned to face the love of her life and slowly responded, "I would like you to personally write a letter to Chu Beijie himself."

Chu Beijie purposefully climbed up the steep steps leading to the palace.

He finally stopped, facing the King's personal palace, the pale light of the winter sun shining on his face and warming him yet he could not ignore a feeling of anguish in his heart.

There was no one present to disturb him, all the palace attends had withdrawn—even Chu Zairan left. He was left standing in front of his brother's palace.

He had once shaken the mighty battlefields yet at this moment he feared opening the wooden doors before him.

His brother's illness had begun from the pain of losing his young sons.

By loving Bai Pingting, he betrayed his only brother.

The confrontation between the two had long begun, ever since the Queen had send assassins to wait near his residence. The two parties had been frozen in stalemate, all that was remaining was for them to make a move.

He had betrayed his brother, the brother who he had grown up idolising and the King he pledged his life to.

He could barely lift his feet, heavy from the burden in his heart.

Before he could reach out to push open the wooden doors, the it silently opened. Chu Beijie looked up into a familiar face which had lost its former radiance to grief, the cheeks shrunken and dark rings around the dim eyes.

"Sister in Law..."

The Queen stepped out, her face weary and assessed Chu Beijie for a moment before gifting him a heartwrenching smile. "The Duke of Zhen-Bei has returned."

Her voice was calm and steady. The grief-stricken cries accompanying the deaths of the young princes that had shaken the Dong Lin's Royal Residence seemed almost like a lifetime ago.

Chu Beijie whose heart was heavy with turmoil replied, "I have returned."

The Queen steps were unsteady; she paused for a moment, closing her eyes to compose herself before quietly stating, "The King has been waiting for you, come." She assessed Chu Beijie for another moment before leaving.

Chu Beijie eyes followed her until she turned the corner and disappeared from his view. It was only then that he turned his gaze toward the partially opened door.

Taking a deep breath, he reached out and pushed open the heavy wooden doors.

Stepping inside the palace he felt as if he was slowly being swallowed up by the darkness. The dying King had become photophobic. Heavy curtains hung over the windows, blocking out all the sunlight. Upon closing the wooden doors, the room became dark as night.

The only light came from a single flickering candle.

To think that the dazzling and majestic palace had fallen into such a wretched state.

Chu Beijie moved towards the large, gold lacquered bed.

"Brother," He quietly called out, "I have returned."

"Returned?" The King had lost a lot of weight but his vigour remained. He stared almost desperately at his younger brother as if trying to memorise every inch of his face. After a long time, his eyes brightened with an older brother's pride and with a faint smile. "I have always known that one day you would return to my side."

He reached out and firmly grasped the hands long calloused by a lifetime of sword wielding, hands within with the same blood flowed.

"Brother, your illness..."

"Don't worry it's nothing major, my eyes have just become sensitive to light and my chest would just occasionally hurt a little. I'm currently taking medicine for it."

Chu Beijie could feel the strength in this brother's grip and his heart felt lighter. Sitting at the King's bedside, he offered warm words of comfort, "My Brother, relax and look after your health. Although there are any soldiers threatening our borders, they are nothing compared to the might of Dong Lin's armies. When I return from the battlefields, I'm sure your health will be better and you can once again welcome me on the battlements as I return victorious." His words were filled with strength and conviction.

The King's eyes were filled with warmth and pride as he gazes at his younger brother.

His brother was driven by his heart, a trait which cannot be afforded for those burdened with the legacy of a nation.

"The enemy is merely lingering near our borders at the moment and have not made a declaration of war yet. If we were to attack by sending out our mighty Duke of Zhen-Bei, why, we would become a laughing stock to our neighbours. My Brother please stay at the palace for a few days."

Chu Beijie who had never neglected a battle before, gravely responded, "My Brother you mustn't overlook these allied troops; their commander is He Xia who has proven himself in battle many times. I believe that it would be better to deal with them immediately, please award me the military power and I shall deal with them at once."

The King knew that Chu Beijie took military matters extremely seriously and dealt with them with great care, picking up on even the minutest of flaws.

If the King was too earnest in trying to delay the war, he would inevitably rouse his suspicion.

As he thought about the deep feelings of trust they had for one another and his own plot to delay Beijie's departure, the King felt an almost overwhelming sense of bitterness. He nodded in agreement. "Brother you are right."

The King knew that Chu Beijie understood every general at the frontlines like the back of his hand and so any attempts to buy time using military matters would be unsuitable.

"General Linan currently has possession of the command flag. I have already asked him to return with it. Since he needs to travel back from the frontlines, he should be back in two days at the latest. Once he returns I will hand you the flag and you can immediately depart with the troops."

Upon hearing this Chu Beijie immediately began animatedly discussing battle tactics before suddenly declaring, "Brother, do not worry. I guarantee no army will step even an inch onto Dong Lin."

As Chu Beijie stepped out of the King's Royal Residence he was met by Chu Zairan who had been waiting outside. "I could hear the King's laughter, ever since Duke's return he has been filled with joy. Duke's residence has been empty for a year now and will require some extensive cleaning, therefore I have arranged for you to stay at the palace. This is something that the citizens also hope for; they have longed for your return."

Chu Zairan stopped at a building located in the centre of the palace and clapped, upon which more than a dozen guards and palace attendants appeared and greeted Chu Beijie.

Chu Zairan continued, "I personally ordered this building to be prepared for you, it's both spacious, comfortable and connected to the plum blossom courtyard you favoured when younger."

Chu Beijie's sharp gaze quickly assessed the assigned palace guards, noting the lack of familiar faces. Remaining expressionless, he nodded, "I see."

After bidding farewell to Chu Zairan, he stepped inside.

Chu Beijie grew up in the Dong Lin royal palace. It wasn't until he was canonised as the Duke of Zhen-Bei that he moved out of the palace into his own residence.

A beautiful palace maid appeared and greeted him, "Duke has travelled far and must be tired. Please allow us to assist you in your bath."

Her eyes were inviting, her voice gentle. Chu Beijie however remained indifferent.

"I have led countless armies and experienced many battlefields. I have never required any assistance bathing." Chu Beijie dismissed the palace maid.

Even though he grew up in the palace as a prince, he was not pampered. Instead he began his military duties in his teens and as a result of hard work, determination, temperament and some natural talent, he quickly rose up the ranks and became a national war hero.

After finally washing off the dust that had collected over the past few days of travelling, Chu Beijie felt refreshed and comfortable.

Despite his physical fatigue, Chu Beijie was nonetheless quite energised. Wearing some lightweight and casual clothes, he stood on the balcony and gazed at the plum blossom courtyard. He stood against the wind, clothes billowing and hair flying, confident and bold. The younger palace maids could only sigh, hearts pounding at the sight.

The plum blossoms were currently in full bloom, just like those back at his secluded estate—a faint fragrance floating in the air.

However, the courtyard was missing something—or rather someone. The setting would never compare with that secluded mountain estate.

On this trip back to the Royal Residence of Dong Lin, it seemed that the most familiar sights were the most distant. In the past, all his palace guards were handpicked. After a year, not a single familiar face remained. His sister-in-law treated him coldly, unable to forget his role in the death of her two sons. In a way it was all for the best. Since his Brother was ill, Chu Beijie needed only to prepare for the war and await the command flag.

Over the next few days Chu Beijie noticed there were no young soldiers, only elderly court officials. When he mentioned this Chu Zairan, he replied, “Currently all the younger soldiers are either stationed at the border or awaiting deployment at home.”

As per Dong Lin military protocol, in the event of war, all soldiers must await orders at home so that their whereabouts are always known. Chu Beijie was unable to find any faults in Chu Zairan’s explanation.

The image of Pingting leaning on the couch, her black hair spreading casually over the pillow, seemed to be imprinted at the back of his mind and would surface frequently.

“Pingting passed her birthday alone, so as for Duke’s birthday, could we be together?” Her face flushed and bearing a gentle and loving smile.

“I will try my hardest.”

Chu Beijie did not in fact promise Pingting anything, but he recalled her eyes alight with happiness. He secretly counted the days until his return.

Unknowingly as he awaited the return of the command flag, it was already his third night in the palace.

Chu Beijie’s patience was at an end when he finally received word from a court messenger. Jumping out of bed he muttered, “To think that someone would dare to delay military matter. When I meet him...”

Dressed in formal attire, Chu Beijie strode towards the King’s residence. On his way, he was interrupted by a kneeling servant, “Duke, please Concubine Li begs for an audience.”

Chu Beijie stopped, gripping the handle of his sword, he looked down at the palace maid. Under the moonlight, it was difficult to discern the features of the girl but she appeared to be young, only fifteen or perhaps sixteen. To think that she would dare to block his path.

“How did you know I would be here?” Chu Beijie’s gaze was cold.

Hearing his deadly tone, the maid was terrified and shaking uncontrollably. Nonetheless she explained, “Ever since Duke’s arrival at the palace, Concubine Li has asked me to wait here for you since you must walk along this past to get to the King’s residence. Since Duke is alone, I managed to pull up my courage and approach you.”

“I am currently busy and have no time for some concubine.” Chu Beijie spat out before continuing towards the King’s palace

Despite her young age, the maid was extremely loyal to her mistress and grabbed Chu Beijie's legs to stop him. "Duke, this matter is extremely important, more so than the military affair you dealing with. Please grant my mistress an audience."

Chu Beijie had met countless different people in his life and was a good judge of character. Upon seeing the maid daring to meet his eyes, he sensed no deception. However, once again he felt a very strange sense of unease, looking back at the King's residence he finally agreed with a gruff. "Lead the way."

The maid was surprised and stunned for a while before saying, "Yes." After standing up, she led Chu Beijie through a maze of courtyards and corridors.

In the dark, they walked along a long and winding path and headed towards the harem. Chu Beijie could vaguely recall this area of the palace. He used to come here and play as a child. Since he knew that his brother had absolute trust in him, Beijie followed the maid confidently.

The maid stopped in front of a newly built residence, which Beijie guessed probably housed the private quarters of his brother's concubines. However he had never heard of a Concubine Li before.

The maid looked back at Chu Beijie before stepping into the residence and quietly announcing, "Madam, the Duke of Zhen-Bei has arrived."

"Please come in." The woman inside appeared to have many worries, unable to fall asleep even in the late hours of the night. She sounded very relieved about Chu Beijie's arrival as if he could solve all of her problems.

Chu Beijie marched inside and quickly scanned the room.

A small charcoal stove was lit near the centre of room, providing some comforting warmth. A beautiful young woman sat towards the back of the room. Upon seeing Chu Beijie, she smiled, "Duke of Zhen-Bei, since it would be difficult for me, I unable to offer a formal greeting. Please indulge me." The woman gently rubbed her protruding belly as she spoke.

Chu Beijie finally understood why that maid had the courage to drag him here.

He sat down without a word and assessed Concubine Li. After a moment he finally announced, "I am very busy so if Madam have anything to say to me please do so."

"The Duke of Zhen-Bei's demeanour is as they say, confident and direct." Concubine Li began, her hand sweeping her hair behind an ear and frowning as if uncertain as to how she should continue before carefully choosing her next words, "I was canonised 7 months ago, as to the reason I'm sure you already know," she said as she gazed lovingly at her bump.

"To give birth to the King's child is the greatest honour for a woman in the harem. I was blessed with this honour and my greatest desire is to safely give birth to this child. However living here in the harem, I have begun to fear for my life and the life of this child. Ever since I heard of your return I have waited to see you. Duke, you are the pillar of Dong Lin, our support and protector, please help me protect my unborn child so that I may safely give birth."

Chu Beijie was rather surprised and asked "Who on earth would dare to harm a woman pregnant with the King's child? If you say you are so terrified, why don't you just tell the King about your concerns?"

"The King is very ill, I have not seen him in many months now."

"Who would dare harm you?"

Concubine Li looked down and remained wordless.

Chu Beijie came to a realisation, “The Queen?”

“Hahaha...” Seeing Xoncubine Li nod her head in answer, Chu Beijie burst out in laughter before glaring at her and coldly responding, “What type of person do you think my sister-in-law is? If she does not like you, you would not have the luxury of speaking to me here today. I am very busy today and I can’t be bothered dealing with your nonsense so I will let this one time slip. Never send people to block my path again.” Following this warning, Beijie turned to leave.

As he stepped out of the room, Concubine Li quietly whispered, “It’s because of Bai Pingting.”

At this Chu Beijie suddenly stopped in his tracks. He turned around and pierced her with a sharp gaze.

“What did you just say?”

“At first the Queen was overjoyed over my pregnancy, even more so than the King since there would be an heir. The Queen would constantly visit me and care for me, almost like the older sister I’ve always wished for. However in the past few days, she has become very cold to me. I can see hatred in her eyes. I fear for the life of my child.” She sighed, “This is all because of Pingting.”

Chu Beijie walked back into the room and stared at Concubine Li trying to find any signs of deceit before finally asking, “What on earth does Pingting have to do with all of this?”

“I don’t know who told the Queen about my connection to Pingting.” Concubine Li said with a bitter smile, “When Pingting poisoned the two princes, the King lost his heirs. My unborn child is his last and yet the child is connected to Pingting. If you were the Queen, how would the Duke of Zhen-Bei feel in this situation?”

“You know Pingting?” Chu Beijie squinted his eyes at her, assessing.

Concubine Li sighed before looking up at Chu Beijie and explaining in a defeated tone, “I met Pingting back in Gui Le at court. After the signing of the 5 year peace treaty, the King of Gui Le gifted me to the King of Dong Lin. I grew up in the Royal Residence, so how could I not know the famous Bai Pingting?”

Chu Beijie stared into Concubine Li’s eyes, assessing the truthfulness of her claim.

If the Queen believed that Concubine Li and Pingting had a connection, then the unborn child was in grave danger.

“Duke, for the sake of this child, I beg of you to stay in the palace for a few more days. I fear the Queen will harm us. I will be giving birth very soon, can Duke not spare just a few days?” Concubine Li placed her hands protectively over her unborn child and broke down in tears.

Chu Beijie felt torn and sighed.

Should the Imperial Concubine Li be pregnant with a son, he would become the future King of Dong Lin.

Dong Lin had already lost two princes. If they were not careful, they may well lose their final hope.

That morning, the King received the requested command flag from General Linan and as agreed the King handed it over to Chu Beijie.

“Brother, preparations are complete, you can depart whenever you desire.” Perhaps it is due to the joy of reuniting with family but the King’s health improved greatly.

Chu Beijie hesitantly accepted the command flag. He never once hesitated over anything before. What is the correct decision? After what seemed like eternity, he turned to the King and said, “Brother, I still have some things to do so I would like to stay in the palace for a few more days.”

It is already the fourth day since arriving at the capital.

In just six days it would be his birthday.

Chapter 32

The secluded mountain residence was very peaceful.

The guards stood outside whilst the young maids worked inside, looks were exchanged as familiar faces greeted one another with occasional encounters. Love was in the air.

Hongqiang upon noting that Zuiju was accompanying Pingting, smiled as she slipped outside to play. Pingting and Zuiju did not mind.

There was little snowfall these days, and the sun shone brightly. Its warm rays melted the thin layer of ice and snow on the ground. Zuiju was always worried about Pingting slipping hence insisted on accompanying her every time she went for a walk.

“Please take care, the ground is slippery.”

Pingting stood beneath the plum blossom tree, stretching to pluck the buds. She laughed, “Every single time I take a step you keep reminding me. If you’re that worried, you may as well help me then.”

Helpless, Zuiju could only move to help Pingting with her task by pulling down the plum tree branches, allowing her to pluck the buds.

“Didn’t you wish to display these in your room?”

“No,” Pingting mischievously replied, revealing a cheeky smile, “for cooking.”

“Cooking?”

She could just imagine the fragrant smell of crane boiled in a mixture of herbs and plum blossom buds.

Pingting cheerfully placed the flower buds and blossoms into a small dish as she began, “I suddenly recall reading in an old text about the medical properties of plum blossoms. I plan to add these buds together with some sugar, salt, wine and winter vegetables and make some preserves in the traditional Gui Le style. When the Duke returns, we can enjoy some together.”

Zuiju quickly reminded, “I have never heard of the idea of using plum blossoms in medicine, so I have no idea of its effects. It should be fine for the Duke to try some but you must take care.”

“I know”, Pingting replied, “Haven’t I followed your nutritional guidelines?”

Realising how far her thoughts had wandered and the truth in Zuiju’s words, Pingting cheeks darkened in embarrassment.

“It’s such a shame that it’s winter, there are very few flowers in bloom. Once Spring and Summer arrive there will be many more to choose from and we can make so many dishes. For example, there are more than five ways of cooking to cook a peony.” Pingting continued whilst picking more buds. After a while however she began to feel a bit tired. Since she was currently pregnant with Chu Beijie’s child, she must never risk overexerting herself. Pingting handed her plate to Zuiju, and the two of them returned to Pingting’s quarters.

“It’s sunset already.” Pingting remarked, “The Duke should have received the command flag by now.”

She was only half correct.

Chu Beijie had long received the command flag but he had still yet to depart.

Chu Beijie was guarding Concubine Li’s residence. On the outside he looked calm and collected as always, inside he was very anxious.

On the dawning of the fifth day, he had already missed his planned departure date.

He wondered how Pingting was coping. She was eager to celebrate his birthday together. He feared how greatly she would be hurt by his broken promise.

He wouldn’t be able to bear it if he caused that utterly desolate look to appear in her eyes again.

“Will Duke keep me company? It will snow tomorrow. Please allow me to play some music for you to appreciate the snowfall.”

She had already been disappointed by him once before.

Yet she would be disappointed once more.

His Brother, his Sister-in-Law, Concubine Li, Chu Zairan and all of the citizens would never understand the way her music, her voice, her slender fingers, her pale red lips and her elegant composure haunted his every thought. He longed for her presence.

The palace was grand but empty. There was fine food and great beauties yet no cure for this feeling of longing.

“I will try my best.”

He longed to wrap his arms around her delicate frame and admire the blossoming Spring and the waxing autumn moon together with her –to travel to the very ends of the world with her, admiring nature’s gifts and never to be parted. He would protect her, never allowing the slightest harm to befall her or allow her to feel any pain.

Yet he was faced with a dilemma. It was a decision that would make or break his very country. How could he possibly choose a woman over the peace and prosperity of his very people, even if she was the only woman he would ever love? Birthdays come and go each year without fail. As for the bloodline of the Dong Lin King...this was the final ray of hope.

Little did he know the messengers Chu Beijie sent out to Pingting had in fact been intercepted by the Queen

The Queen's face was pale with shock as she slowly stepped into the King's residence and greeted the King. She waved for the palace attendants to leave.

"My Queen, why do you look so pale?" Asked the King once they were alone, "Hasn't my Brother stayed back?"

The Queen's head was decorated with a pearl phoenix ornament. With a stiffly straight back she slowly sat down as if she had a world of troubles and no idea where to start.

After finally calming down her pounding heart, the Queen retrieved a letter from her belt and placed it before the King and said with a raspy voice, "This was just intercepted, the receiver is the Duke of Zhen-Bei, I believe King will find the identity of the sender quite shocking."

The King picked up the letter and glanced at it before exclaiming, "Bei Mo's General Ze Yin?" The Queen appeared very anxious. Biting her lip, she stammered out, "The contents are very shocking, King."

It was a very long letter but the King dared not to dismiss any word. He carefully read the contents before finally ending up at the final line – the mastermind behind this was He Xia. The final words kept reverberating in his mind, mocking him. After a while he finally let out a long breath and looked up at his Queen's pained expression. "What does my Queen think of this?"

"I have already ordered for people to confirm the identity of the sender; this is indeed Ze Yin's handwriting. This seal is also his personal seal; there is no mistake."

"Ze Yin shouldn't have any connection with my Brother so why would he send a letter to him?"

"No matter what, Ze Yin has no need to lie in his letter. Revealing the plot between He Xia and the King of Bei Mo, puts himself in a position of unnecessary danger." The Queen's eyes were watery as she gazed at the King. She shutted her eyes as if they would shield her from this reality. He painfully cried out, "He Xia...my poor children, it was He Xia..."

Unable to hold back the pain, the Queen cried against the King's shoulder.

With a pained expression in his eyes, the King slowly rubbed the Queen's back to comfort her. "If this is true, then Bai Pingting wasn't the culprit. Does my Brother know of this?"

The Queen sobbed and shook her head. After finally getting a hold of her emotions, she finally asked, "If Bai Pingting isn't the murderer, then what should we do after the plan for He Xia to kidnap her?"

The King remained silent.

He stood up, a troubled expression pasted on his face. He turned away from the Queen and solemnly stated, "Bai Pingting is not the culprit, but that is an entirely different issue from the situation at hand. We are doing this for the lives of countless soldiers; we must hand her over to He Xia. As members of the royal family of Dong Lin, we must above all do what is necessary for our people—regardless of personal desires."

The Queen stared at her husband's back with deep respect in her eyes. Those strong shoulders bear the weight of the entire nation.

"I understand," she nodded, "Regardless of whether Bai Pingting is innocent or guilty, we must resolve the issue with the army pressing against our borders. He Xia's troops should reach the Beijie's secluded residence by nightfall tomorrow. He's been focused on protecting Concubine Li's unborn child. We must ensure he does not leave."

Upon realising that they must bargain with the man who murdered her children, the Queen felt a wave of disgust. Yet as the Queen, as the mother of her nation, how could she put her feelings above her duty?

“By the way, concerning Concubine Li,” the King began with furrowed brow, “last night the imperial doctor reported that she received a shock and that the baby’s condition is a little...”

The Queen was noticeably startled by this. In order to keep Chu Beijie in the palace she arranged for Concubine Li to be threatened and sent servants to advise her to plead help from him.

As long as Concubine Li was unaware of what was truly going on, she would be able to truthfully trick Chu Beijie into staying. Without such a serious situation, once the issue regarding the potential heir to the throne has been resolved, there would be no way to keep Chu Beijie away from Bai Pingting.

Concubine Li’s baby is the only remaining child of the King. If something were to go amiss ...What could they do?

“The baby’s condition is amiss? Please do not worry King. The baby is the continuation of your legacy and that of our ancestors; they will definitely be protecting him from above in the heavens. I will go and check...”

A sudden flurry of footsteps interrupted the Queen’s words.

“K-K-K...King!” Concubine Li’s personal maid stumbled into the room and knelt before him, her breathing heavy and stammered out, “Concubine Li’s baby, the fetus has moved, she will be giving birth soon!”

The Queen hesitated before stepping forward and addressing the maid, “Why is this happening so early? At the last health check, the doctor said she should have another 7 to 8 days before delivery?”

The maid peered at the Queen and recalled how her mistress may have actually been harmed by the Queen and bowed her head replying, “I do not know. Concubine Li was sitting calmly in the building atrium before suddenly crying out that her stomach hurt. She fell screaming in pain. I was so frightened by this I had no idea what to do.”

The Queen felt no emotional attachment to Concubine Li, but her unborn child was of utmost important. Her husband was a wise and just ruler. How could his line end with him? Upon hearing the maid’s words, she felt panicked and shouted, “What is the doctor doing? Has he arrived yet?”

The maid stuttered out “Al...already sent for.”

“King!”

The King’s eyes also revealed his internal panic, but he maintained a strong façade and grasped the Queen’s hand comfortingly, “My Queen, do not fear. Concubine Li’s body has been healthy and strong. Besides, delivering 7 to 8 days early is not an uncommon thing.”

With the Queen, he rushed towards Concubine Li’s residence.

There was chaos outside the building as maids and several elderly midwives rushed about.

“Hot water! Hurry up and bring hot water!”

“Clean towels!”

“Ginseng soup! Quickly, go and bring me the ginseng soup!” The attendants hurried about.

“Ahhhh! Ahhhhh! No! Ahhh, King...!” Concubine Li’s pained cries became louder and louder, overpowering the panicked voices of the countless midwives.

Chu Beijie was upholding his promise and stood outside the residence with sword in hand, awaiting the birth of the child. Upon seeing the King and Queen he bowed and greeted them, “Brother, Sister in law.”

The King arrived leading his entourage and addressed the imperial doctor, “What is their condition?”

“King, I’m afraid Concubine Li has been restless and unable to eat or sleep properly these past few days. It has affected the baby.” The imperial doctor’s forehead was drenched in sweat, “I fear that she will be giving birth early.”

“Ahhhhh! Ahhhhh!” Concubine Li’s cries pierced the room.

The doctor immediately rushed inside again.

The King stood facing the door and spoke out, “My beloved please do not fear; I am here for you. The doctor has said that the baby is healthy, everything will be alright soon.”

Concubine Li’s screams continued to pierce the room, unaffected by the King’s attempt to comfort her.

“King, what shall we do?” The Queen quietly asked unable to hide the panic in her eyes. By using Concubine Li in her scheme, she didn’t consider the possibility of harming the baby.

If anything happened to the child, death would be her only means of apology.

Chu Beijie stood to the side and examined the King and Queen’s expression, feeling a little suspicious.

Although the Queen was panicked, she still maintained some control over her senses. Noticing the look in Chu Beijie’s eyes, she quickly composed herself. The King also noticed and exchanged a glance with the Queen. They could feel each other’s unease.

They were originally counting on Concubine Li giving birth in another 7 to 8 days which would be more than enough to ensure that Bai Pingting would fall into He Xia’s hands thus guaranteeing the retreat of the pressing armies.

With this sudden event, the time they would be able to delay Chu Beijie’s return was significantly shortened.

In addition to all this, Chu Beijie was anything but a fool. With his astute senses, even the best of plots would be unravelled by him eventually.

The Queen forced herself to remain calm. By now, there was little more they could do. The most important thing was to ensure the safe delivery of the child, and so she stood beside the King and awaited the news.

Not far in the forest, a flock of birds were shocked into flight.

Pingting suddenly opened her eyes and sat up in bed.

The full moon hung high up in the sky, its pale light reflecting off the thin layer of ice and snow. The stars were hidden this night.

“Miss?” Zuiju had been sleeping in Pingting’s room to keep her company. Rubbing her eyes and putting on a cloak, she got out of her bed and walked toward Pingting. “Are you thirsty?”

Pinging shook her head.

The moonlight lit up her delicate face and shrouded it in an air of sorrow.

“The birds have been shocked into flight. There are people heading up the mountain.”

Zuiju looked out the window towards the forest. In the darkness she could not make out much, “Perhaps it’s the woodcutter?”

“What would a woodcutter be doing out there this late at night? In the darkness, the wild animals must be hungry and roaming. No, he would go out in the day.” Pinging looked down in deep in thought. After a while her eyes flickered as if with some realisation. “Find me Moran.”

Zuiju nodded and opened the door to order the night maid waiting outside.

Moran arrived not long after, his clothes were neat and tidy and not a hair was out of place. He looked nothing like something who had just been roused from bed. Stepping into the room he looked toward Pinging and asked, “Is there anything I can do for you Miss Bai?”

“It’s already quite late, why are you not resting?” Pinging assessed him, “Has something happened?”

Moran replied, “As the commander of the guards, I make my rounds at this hour every night. A while ago a flock of birds were shocked into flight. I ordered a few of the guards to investigate; everything should be fine but it is better to be cautious.” With a sudden change in expression he asked, “Was Miss Bai awoken by the birds?”

Upon hearing that he had already sent guards to investigate, Pinging appeared noticeably calmer and nodded, “I have accompanied armies to battle before. In the dead of night, the sudden flight of birds usually indicates enclosing enemy soldiers.”

Moran revealed a smile and nodded, “Indeed. After spending years in the army, hearing the sound of birds inevitably puts one on guard. Miss Bai need not worry. Myself and the guards will look after this matter. The night wind is chilly; you should rest soon.”

With more tasks awaiting him, he offered a few words of comfort and departed.

Zuiju yawned and tiredly said, “You heard from Moran himself; everything is fine. He is looking after the matter. The night wind is chilly, may I close the window now?”

Pinging had always been a light sleeper, after this commotion she was unable to fall back asleep. She felt full of spirit and so was understandably unwilling to lie back down. “The winter full moon is so beautiful, shining down on the glittering snow like a quilt. It will not be cold.”

Zuiju shook her head at Pinging’s stubbornness. Knowing that there was no way she could possibly convince her to sleep, she sighed, “You’re usually so mature. Where is this sudden burst of childishness coming from?” Crawling under the covers next to Pinging, she also looked up at the moon.

“The Duke should be back soon right?” Staring at the moon, Pinging softly asked with a tender look in her eyes.

Zuiju giggled at this and gleefully said, “I just knew you would say that. I bet you have been thinking about it constantly.” Moving to hold Pinging’s wrist and check her pulse she sighed, “Love is such an interesting thing. The Duke is such a feared and admired man yet you are a calm and easy going person. After encountering love, you have both become so foolish at times.”

Pingting turned to look at Zuiju, "Sure, laugh at me now. Love is something you won't understand until you encounter it." Turning away to gaze into the moonlit night again, she whispered tenderly, "Such a beautiful moon. If I could sit on the snow covered ground and play the zither accompanied by its gentle rays, it would be so perfect."

Zuiju immediately stopped her train of thought, "Don't ever think about it. It's such a cold night. If you sit out in the snow playing the qin, you might get sick again. You finally got better after taking medicine for so long. Are you really going to risk it?"

Pingting understood that she was right and said nothing more.

Although it was nice to play music by moonlight, the desired listener was not present.

Silently admiring the snow covered ground, Pingting suddenly recalled that day in the Hua Residence when Chu Beijie first visited to request a song. Granted one, he then asked for another.

At the time she had no idea who Chu Beijie was but already guessed that he was using an alias. "Mister wanted a piece from me so I did you a favour. Of course you should use your real name."

"Does My Lady not want anything?" Chu Beijie asked.

"What do I want?"

"What My Lady wants is naturally a music critic."

The sound of his pleasant laugh, full of confidence and ease, echoed in her mind.

So determined as if nothing in the world could bring him down.

Looking back she realised that she has not forgotten a single word or act by Chu Beijie from that day. She could recall every second together vividly.

She never would have thought that things would unfold to bring them to this day.

If this were a gift from the gods, then they would indeed be generous. She had a tiny child inside of her, growing with each passing day, quietly sleeping in her womb.

The first pregnancy is always the hardest, in another two months it will become clear that another life is growing inside of her.

Pingting caressed her lower abdomen, it is still flat and the warmth spreads from her fingertips to her heart as if that tiny life inside of her was already protecting her like his father.

She turned around and whispered, "Zuiju, thank you."

"For what?"

"Thank you for allowing me to personally tell the Duke this news." Her gaze was tender and full of dreams, "It will no doubt be the happiest moment of my life."

Pingting looked out the window towards the east. It is calm. The tall trees formed a wall, blocking her sight.

That is the direction from which Chu Beijie would be returning.

The sky was slowly lightening.

A baby's cries interrupted the tension in the room, faint but creeping through the gap in the door. The sound made its mark on everyone's hearts.

The Dong Ling King jumped up from his seat.

"The child is born?"

The doctor ran out of the room, his face pale with fatigue, and immediately kowtowed to the King and Queen announcing, "Congratulations, both mother and child are well."

"Is it a boy or a girl?" The Queen interrupted.

All eyes were focussed on the imperial doctor's mouth.

"Dear Queen, it is a beautiful little princess."

The faces of nearly everyone present darkened.

Not a prince.

Dong Lin remained without a crown prince.

The doctor understood that it was not the anticipated news and so sneaking a look at the King quietly continued, "Concubine Li and the baby are well, would King like to see them?"

"Yes." The King nodded, relaxing his furrowed brow "It has been hard on Concubine Li." He then turned his gaze onto his younger brother.

"Congratulations Brother," Chu Beijie walked over and bowed before continuing, "The war is still looming. There is no time to waste; I have received the command flag and shall now head to the frontlines. Once I return victorious we can have some celebratory drinks together."

The King was noticeably startled by this but quickly collected himself, "Brother there is no need to be so hasty. For such an important battle you should at least allow me to send you off at the city entrance."

Chu Beijie gravely replied, "Military matters are of utmost importance. There is no luxury for grand motions at this moment." Although he was speaking to the King, Beijie's eyes were assessing the Queen's every expression.

The Queen felt uneasy but managed to maintain a façade of calm and addressed the King, "King, Chu Beijie's words are not without merit. Military matters are of utmost importance. He has already stayed in the palace for several days now. I'm sure the soldiers are awaiting his command."

The King exchanged a quick glance with the Queen and nodded, "Then let you be off brother. Stay safe. I will await your triumphant return so we may celebrate together."

Chu Beijie hummed in agreement. He turned and left his footsteps loud and heavy.

After his figure finally disappeared in the distance, the Queen gestured for the newly appointed captain of the guard. "Immediately block off Zhao Qing Residence. Do as I previously ordered."

“Queen, everything has been prepared as ordered. The arrows have been exchanged for practice unsharpened ones. These will only penetrate a maximum of half an inch. None of the guards on duty have been trained by the Duke before.”

“Good.” The Queen nodded before looking up at the King, her eyes shining with determination, “Go then.”

“Yes!”

Chapter 33

The sky was lightening, the northerly winds were blowing and the sun was finally rising out from behind the clouds bringing warmth with its rays.

The first thing Pingting did that morning was process the pot of plum blossoms she had picked, adding wine, sugar, salt and winter vegetables. After much work she suddenly stopped, “Maybe we should also add some vanilla.”

“I’ll go get some.” Hongqiang excitedly grabbed some before staring at the pot and admiring, “This looks so nice must taste delicious. Are you preparing this for the Duke’ return?”

Zuiju easily guessed what Hongqiang was hinting at and glanced at her teasing, “I’m sure when it’s ready you’ll get to have a taste.”

Hongqiang clapped her hands a few times, ecstatic before asking, “Is there anything I can help with?”

Pingting had spent the night gazing at the moon and felt her spirit nourished. She happily made her requests, “Go and find a nice spot in the courtyard, clear away the snow and dig a small pit. Snow covered soil retains a light and refreshing fragrance. We’ll bury the pot in the snow and smoke it for half an hour allowing the fragrance to seep into the pot. When the Duke returns we can open up this pot of ‘Locked Away Goodies’.”

Zuiju tutted, “Locked Away Goodies? What an interesting name, very thoughtfully chosen, makes me excited to see how it tastes.”

Pingting glared at her teasing but couldn’t hide her faint look of embarrassment and smiled, causing Zuiju’s eyes to light up.

Hongqiang picked the broom and went outside in search of a suitable place.

Pingting picked up the pot which was unexpectedly heavy. Losing her centre of balance, she staggered a bit, giving Zuiju a fright as she hurriedly took over carrying the pot. “Please, no more of this, sooner or later you’ll give me a heart attack or something.”

Zuiju then carried the pot outside.

Hongqiang had long picked a spot and swept away the snow. She was currently digging a pit but having a lot of trouble doing so.

“Let me have a go.” Zuiju pulled up her sleeves and picked up the shovel. After working up a sweat, she too was unable to dig up much and spat out “This ground is so annoying. It’s hard like stone.”

Pingting was amused from watching their attempts. Upon hearing Zuiju complaints, Pingting couldn't hold back her laughter any longer. "You simply aren't used to manual labour. The winter the ground greatly harden so we won't be able to dig it up. It'll be much easier to ask one of the guards to come and help."

"That's easy. I'll go find someone to help." Hongqiang was on good terms with the guards so she could easily find assistance.

As she turned away, Zuiju tugged on the back of her clothes to hold her back, "No need to look for anyone. Help delivered itself."

The three of them looked towards the doorway and discovered a person walking towards them. From afar, the figure looked like Moran.

"Oh, General Chu..." Hongqiang began but seeing his expression, she swallowed back the rest of her words.

It was indeed Moran.

He was wearing the same clothes as last night, his sword at his hip. Not a hair was out of place. His facial expression however betrayed him.

Even the news of pressing enemy troops would not warrant such an expression.

Seeing his facial expression, Pingting and Zuiju's smiles froze.

After a long moment Pingting finally asked, "What's wrong?"

Moran's calm demeanour hid the true extent of his inner turmoil. Taking a deep breath, he began with an even but quiet voice to avoid shocking Pingting, "The situation has changed, we should not stay here for much longer. Please follow me."

Turning around and proceeding a few paces he realised that Pingting had made no move to follow and frowned, "There is no time to waste, please make haste."

Pingting stood unmoving, the north wind bit into her skin. Rubbing her hands for warmth, she finally said, "Follow me." before turning and walking inside.

Seeing her calm expression, Moran couldn't help but feel surprised for a moment. He hesitated before following.

Zuiju and Hongqiang could feel tension in the atmosphere, however they were not aware of the true seriousness of their situation. Knowing that Pingting was discussing the matter privately with Moran, Zuiju tugged on Hongqiang's sleeve. The two carried the unburied pot inside, trying to remain calm as they waited.

Pingting stepped into the room and sat down. Her eyes fluttered as she otherwise sat unmoving in contemplation. After a long while, she picked up the cup of tea in front of her. Holding it up to her lips, she realised it was already cold and placed it back onto the table before softly asking Moran, "Are they sent by the Queen?"

Moran was surprised once more.

Chu Beijie wouldn't have told her about the Queen's troops lurking nearby.

He looked at Pingting.

Pingting laughed somewhat harshly, "It really isn't that hard to imagine. That depth of hatred she has for me... The Duke would not allow me step a foot outside the walls of this residence and left all of his guards behind, even you. In the entirety of Dong Lin, who else would dare to oppose him and loathe me deeply enough to do so? Just tell me how grave the situation is."

With her final sentence, any remaining languidness disappeared. Her eyes shined with intelligence and calculation, reminding him she was once the commander that saved Bei Mo from annihilation.

Moran stared at the delicate face before him before confessing, "As dire as can be. Last night I sent out 10 guards into the forest on a reconnaissance mission. None of them returned. This morning I sent out a few more to try and locate the Queen's troops and record their movements..."

"The guards have not returned," Pingting interrupted before sighing and continuing, "If that is the case, I'm afraid the mountain is already completely surrounded. Does the Queen truly have so many troops?"

"Miss Bai, there is little time to waste, please come with me to the back of the mountain." Moran began, "The Duke built a hidden base there in case of emergencies. It is difficult to locate, this residence is no longer safe."

Pingting looked at him, "We only have one team of guards, even if we include you we cannot defend against the troops surrounding us. The final result is very clear. Why have they not made a move yet?"

Moran thought for a moment before suddenly looking up and asking almost disbelievingly, "Could they have already discovered the location of the hidden base? Are they simply waiting to catch us on our way there?"

To think of the opponent's might, with troops far outnumbering them, what else is there to do? The feeling of hopelessness was difficult to keep at bay.

Pingting did not answer, instead she pulled open the curtains and looked out assessing the time of day before suddenly asking, "How many messenger pigeons do we have?"

"Fifteen in total, why?" Moran asked.

"Release them all, send them off in all directions."

Her voice was soft and calm but filled with charisma. Moran obeyed without hesitation, "Yes I will do so immediately."

Zuiju entered upon seeing Moran's hurried departure. She carried a fresh pot of tea and looked at Pingting, staring up at the sky by the door. They've been so busy preparing the plum blossoms for pickling this morning that Pingting's hair was not pinned up. Instead, the ebony strands fell loosely, framing the distant and mournful expression on her face. Her expression frightened Zuiju somewhat. She softly touched her arm, "Miss Bai?"

Pingting was pulled back to the present and looked at her, "It's you?" Laughing somewhat sadly, she continued, "It's as if as long as we're alive, there will be no peace. It seems so pointless. It's cold outside. Come in and let us drink some tea to warm ourselves."

Zuiju carried the tea inside and poured a cup for Pingting and herself. Cradling the cup to warm her hands, she studied Pingting's expression. After a long while she said, "No matter what happens, Moran will take care of it. This is still the Duke of Zhen-Bei's territory; who would dare do anything here?"

Pingting knew Zuiju was quick-witted and a talented physician but nonetheless still a young girl. She gently replied, "It's precisely knowing this is the Duke of Zhen-Bei's territory that I'm worried. Who else who dare to do so, other than someone whose power rivals the Duke? Even the Duke's departure must have been within their calculations. I'm

afraid..." Pingting looked down at her current flat stomach, her hands covering it protectively. Her eyes drifted towards Zuiju.

Zuiju was slightly startled by her piercing gaze and stiffly replied, "I didn't tell anyone. I didn't even tell the Duke. Who else could I tell?"

Pingting nodded and sighed, "I hope things are not as bad as I have predicted."

The hanging screen was quickly raised, and the cold wind followed Moran into the room.

The two looked up and noticed Moran's expression was worse than before.

"The pigeons did not fly far before they were all shot down." Moran said with great difficulty, "All fifteen of them, not one survived. The residence is completely and thoroughly surrounded."

It was only then that Zuiju understood the scope of what was happening. She released a scream, her eyes widening.

Moran thought for a moment before speaking through gritted teeth, "Would Miss Bai please give me the sword the Duke left to you? I will send some guards to fight their way out. An army base is located about 20 miles south. Once the general sees the sword, he will immediately send out rescue troops."

Pingting tilted her head and gazed at the sword hanging on the wall.

Chu Beijie had left that behind for her.

His hands had been warm as they held hers. "I leave Moran and the guards here to protect you. If the unthinkable happens here, send someone by a fast horse with this sword to the Dragon Tiger Barracks twenty miles north of here, and ask General Chen Mu to help. He recognises my sword."

His words rang in her ears.

That jewel encrusted sword that once slayed countless enemies hung silently on the wall.

Pingting didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Chu Beijie had planned everything out so well, thinking of all possibilities except this one.

Who could blame him? No one could have ever guessed that things would progress to this stage.

Pingting walked over and slowly took down the sword, caressing the hilt.

Knowing that there was no time to waste and seeing her dismay, Moran could only say, "Only this sword can represent the Duke and muster the troops. After the rescue troops arrive, it will be returned immediately."

Stepping forward and he reached for the sword, only for Pingting move away.

Pingting always considered the overall picture rather than acting on selfish whims, but at this critical moment, why was she having second thoughts?

Facing a formidable enemy, every second was crucial. Recalling the numerous soldiers bound to be surrounding them his heart sank.

With her arms wrapped tightly around the sword, Pingting sat down again. She looked up at Moran, a slightly haunted look in her eyes, and softly asked, “With the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s residence so heavily surrounded, do you really think the King is unaware of it?”

Moran was evidently shaken and paled upon realisation.

Not on the Queen’s secret orders?

But on the King’s instead?

If the King himself was also playing a role in this, would there be any hope left?

Pingting continued, “Sealing the paths traversing the mountain is not a simple task yet we knew nothing. This is because we were long surrounded, and they did not wish for us to know. As for the civilians living nearby and the army camp 20 miles south, how could they be unaware?”

Moran could not utter a word in response.

To be honest there was no need for him to answer these two questions.

Like a fog lifting, everything was coming together and becoming clear.

Chu Beijie had prepared for every possibility, guarding against enemies and his sister-in-law, yet never did he ever consider the thought of needing to guard against his own beloved brother, the dignified and good King of Dong Lin.

Hearts were forever tied through blood.

The Brother that should have known him best, the Brother who should most clearly understand how much Pingting meant to him.

Zuiju realised she had been holding her breath.

Pingting looked down at the sword resting next to her pounding heart. She could almost feel Beijie’s warmth clinging to the cold metal.

“The army camp would either have moved by now, or the General was replaced. There will be no help.” Pingting looked out the window before suddenly asking, “What is the date today?”

Zuiju quietly answered, “It is the fourth.”

The sun moved the sky, it was already noon.

“The fourth?” Smiling, Pingting’s gaze was filled with warmth and longing, “Then there are just two more days.” Turning to look at Moran she began, “I want a topographic map of this area and all the details available —the number of guards, their level of skill, our food and water source. That includes the hunting and woodcutting patterns of the locals...”

After giving out all of her commands, Pingting took a deep, contented breath before coldly saying, “Having the target heavily surrounded yet making not move. It seems they want to lure us into surrendering. This is not a characteristic of the King of Dong Lin but of someone very familiar. Who could it be?” Pingting pondered the question, her brows furrowed. Her gaze however gradually became more firm and steady.

The capital of Dong Lin.

The sun's rays pierced through the darkness, shrouding the world with light and warmth. Despite the sunlight shining upon the palace, there was an unrelenting sense of gloom.

The King and Queen stepped inside Concubine Li's residence and gently comforted the weak and pale faced concubine. The palace maids immediately brought over the baby princess, swaddled in white silk. She was presented to the King and Queen.

"She looks just like King." The Queen whispered.

The King's brows were furrowed. Looking at his newborn daughter, he forced a smile. The corners of his lips were still uplifted when clashing weapons sounded outside.

"King, please take care!" The sound of weapons was piercing. The King's personal guards exchanged a look and realized the turning tide of battle outside. Four of them moved to protect the King and Queen. Unsheathing their swords, they stood in front, vigilant of their surroundings. The remaining two guards hid positioned themselves at the window to track the enemy.

Pained cries were followed by heavy thudding sounds. The ruckus reached the room, waking the baby princess who began crying.

The sound of clashing weapons suddenly stopped, but the silence was anything other than settling.

A gleam passed through the King's eyes. He suddenly stood up and pushed open the door to stand at the top of the stairs.

Chu Beijie's calm figure entered his sight.

The fighting was over.

The courtyard was marked by streaks of blood, injured guards staggered with gritted their teeth. They refused to utter a sound despite the pain.

The few uninjured guards tightly gripped their pikes as they surrounded Chu Beijie, but none of them dared to challenge him.

Chu Beijie stood in the middle of the courtyard, looking down at the sword in his hand. Blood slowly dripped from the tip and fell like tears upon the smooth pavement.

His expression was eerily calm, evidently unconcerned about the guards surrounding him. Not even the greatest of armies could hold him back.

Perhaps that would indeed be the case.

The coldness in his demeanour evoked a shiver.

Everyone stared at the mighty and lauded Duke of Zhen-Bei. Unblinking and holding their breaths, they dared not to make even a single move.

When the final drop of blood fell from his sword, Chu Beijie looked up at his brother. With a pained and almost haunted look in his eyes, he finally asked, "Why?"

His voice was soft, yet no one could mistake the threat it carried.

Covered in blood but stubbornly refusing to give in to pain lied the captain of the guards, tasked with stopping Chu Beijie earlier.

The Queen was shaken by his sharp gaze. She opened her mouth to answer but felt the King grasp her wrist. She lowered her eyes, standing silently beside the King.

“I was careless.” The King stood at the top of the stairs, looking down at his only younger brother and sighed, “After commanding the army for so many years, you have always kept the command flag on you at all times. Of course you wouldn’t need to go back to your quarters to retrieve it. Beijie, must you really waste all that I have done for you?”

Chu Beijie simply stared at him and asked once more, “Why?”

It was long past the point of no return.

“Because you are my only brother. You are Dong Lin’s Duke of Zhen-Bei.” The King’s voice rose as he spoke, becoming more assured, “It is unlikely that I will have a son. One day all of this will be yours. This country will be yours along with its countless people and the brave soldiers who guard our borders. Everything will be yours.”

The words resounded.

Chu Beijie was unmoved. Standing tall, he stared at the King. The monarch’s eyes were momentarily full of regret before becoming stricken with torment and sorrow.

“In the face of a war, as a member of the Royal House, the safety of our nation should be our priority. Brother, you tried absolutely everything to delay my departure. Are you not concerned about the situation at the frontlines?” Chu Beijie speculated before shaking his head, “No, that’s not it.” His expression darkened, “You wanted to stop me from returning to the residence.”

A small isolated residence, why did the King and Queen care so much of it?

Chu Beijie noticed the almost undetectable expression on the Queen’s face and felt his heart skip a beat. With a slight tremor, he asked already knowing the answer, “Was it for Pingting?”

Pingting was away from his protection. If the King participated, then even with Moran’s help, there was little hope for her continued wellbeing.

Seeing that the King was unwilling to answer, Chu Beijie felt his heart grow cold.

“Brother?” Chu Beijie quietly called out, suppressing the swelling rage within.

His voice was very quiet with a slight tremor. If the sword hilt were not made of iron, it would have long been crushed.

Pingting.

They lured him back to get Pingting.

Could there have been a major upheaval during his delay in the Royal Residence?

Perhaps when he returned, he would no longer be able to see that familiar figure sitting beneath the tree?

Chu Beijie looked at the King, the feeling of betrayal evident in his eyes yet he could not help but feel the faintest flicker of hope.

He hoped that his brother would at least, on the account of their brotherly affection, leave Pingting a chance for survival.

Even the hardened hearted King of Dong Lin refused to meet his gaze, choosing instead to look away.

Noticing that his brother refused to meet his gaze, Chu Beijie froze.

His heart sank. He felt as if darkness was swallowing up his entire being.

The sixth.

“On the Duke’s birthday, could we be together?”

The sound of birds chirping surrounded him. He could see Pingting’s every smile and gesture imprinted on his very soul.

He made a promise for the sixth.

He felt numb.

As his fears began to overwhelm him, he felt his heart grow cold.

A moment later, a look of decisiveness swept across Chu Beijie’s face. Tightly grasping his sword, he turned to leave.

The guards surrounded Chu Beijie, pikes poised warily. However, as he walked towards the exit, power exuded with every step. The guards were shocked and unsure of whether to stop him or not. Chu Beijie’s sword remained pointed towards the ground. Seemingly unaffected by the steel pointed at him, the Duke pressed closer with his every step as if nothing could stop him, not even a blade to his heart.

His gaze was dark like the vast oceans, unfathomable. At this moment, anyone could feel a cold terrifying storm was gathering.

No one dared to meet his gaze just as no one dared to cross his sword.

Who has not heard of the mighty Duke of Zhen-Bei?

The guards were forced to step back in the face of his pressing aura.

“Let him go.” The King solemnly said.

The guards parted, making way for Chu Beijie to pass.

The Queen’s phoenix headpiece swayed as she called out, “King!”

“Does my Queen wish for me to kill him, or let him kill every single one of our guards?” The King stood stiffly. He stared at Chu Beijie’s figure until he finally left the courtyard and sighed heavily, “Let him go. It should be nearly over by now. Even if he reaches the residence, it will be too late for him to do anything.”

Even after Chu Beijie was long gone, the heavy atmosphere remained present. No one dared to move. Even the baby princess who seemed to sense the danger and gloom remained silent.

The King of Dong Lin looked at the slowly darkening sky, his eyes unreadable. Deep down was the slightest tinge of sorrow and regret.

The sound of footsteps finally broke the silence as the old Senior Official Chu Zairan clambered up the stairs and fell to his knees before the King, “King, after departing the palace, the Duke of Zhen-Bei directly appointed twelve young army officials, mustered a three thousand man cavalry unit with the command flag and left from the west gate.”

“Let him go.” The King of Dong Lin turned his eyes away from the distance and recovered his composure, walking down the stairs he gently said, “Without knowing the pain of loss, how could he grow to become the future King of Dong Lin?”

Beijie, go and see with your own eyes, the ruins of your home.

I hope that as you see the burning fire, see it swallowing the last shreds of your selfish desires.

As a King, to rule a nation, you may not have final reservations.

Chapter 34

The guards were vigilant while the maids were silenced. The huge secluded residence’s atmosphere became silent in just a day. Rather than simply the lacking of the coo pigeon sounds, it was more like the quietness of death.

No one coughed or talked loudly. Even walking was done on tiptoes. It seemed that at just a slight sound would instantly attract a storm of enemies from every direction.

Pingting was sitting in Chu Beijie’s office for the first time.

She methodically opened and read the scrolls of the related data in the pile on the desk. Several documents had Chu Beijie’s comments of approval. In regards to military affairs and errors, his tone was cold and harsh but those pertaining to the livelihood of people, the statements were more simple and good-natured.

Occasionally there’d be one or two separate documents which appeared to be poems Chu Beijie wrote. His familiar handwriting was just like him, calm yet wild at the same time.

There was a white corner showing at the bottom of a scroll which may have been carefully hidden by its owner. Pingting’s sharp eyes sought it out. It appeared to be a neat, well-structured drawing.

The picture was lifelike, the strokes with proper depth.

It had trees, a lake, snow, qin and the person holding the qin, in a pale green dress. The wind swept wisps of her silky black hair as she smiled and talked.

That smile was so beautiful, so beautiful that even Pingting was momentarily drunk.

She continued to dreamily look at it for a little longer and couldn’t bear to look away.

“Miss Bai, there are only old documents and a few of the Duke’s belongings on the desk. As for the maps and the latest reports, I have them here.”

She only stopped her soul from floating happily on the four seas when she heard Moran’s voice as he hurried in. She quickly stowed away the drawing, planning to put it back where it originally was. She stopped, grinded her teeth and hid the parchment in her arms.

She looked up to find Moran holding a pile of things.

“This is the personal letter that the King sent to the Duke to hurry him back to the capital.” Moran rolled open the private, golden yellow scroll with tassels.

Pingting lowered her head to read it carefully. “Yun Chang and Bei Mo have combined forces? Ze Yin has left, leaving only Ruohan and Sen Rong. I reckon Ruo Han is better, but Yun Chang...” A familiar name suddenly jumped into her view and made her feel momentarily dizzy. She blinked and tried to read it more clearly, yet that familiar name that prickled her heart did not change the slightest on the scroll.

A thorn pierced at her heart.

Pingting’s face paled and she slowly sat on the chair. Her voice was full of disbelief. “He Xia is currently being hunted by the King of Gui Le. How is he able to command Yun Chang’s army to threaten the Dong Lin’s borders?”

Moran couldn’t help feelh a little awkward as he explained, “He Xia married Princess Yaotian hence becoming the Prince Consort of Yun Chang and possessing the power to command Yun Chang’s troops. Everyone under the skies knows this fact but your residence...The Duke said that Miss Bai no longer has any connection to He Xia therefore refused to let you know.”

He glanced at Pingting whose pale face was as gleaming as snow.

So that was it.

He Xia had married.

He Xia’s wife was the Princess of Yun Chang.

He Xia had used his marriage.

It turned out that he refused to let go of her.

Or perhaps, he refused to let go of Chu Beijie.

Everything now fell into place, accompanied with the heartache of interpretation. No matter how intelligent, she could not undo the inextricable knots of her heart.

Pingting remained silent, quietly rolling up the handwritten letter of the King of Dong Lin. She put it aside and slowly mouthed, “The battle at the border is unlikely to happen.”

“How does Miss know?” Moran asked incredulously.

Pingting softly shook her head. “Because He Xia is already here. The main advisor is not on the border’s battlefield, therefore how could there be a battle there?”

Moran's expression changed and lowered his voice. "Please do not joke, Miss. This is Dong Lin territory. If He Xia enters here, then wouldn't Dong Lin have been defeated already?"

"What victory or defeat? It is simply an advantageous deal to both parties. Without the the King of Dong Lin's support, how could He Xia bring his troops to this place?" Pingting's smiled a bit as she slowly swaggered to stand from the chair.

Her opponent was actually He Xia.

He was the only other famous general that could rival Chu Beijie. Back then, because of his existence, even Dong Lin could not easily attack Gui Le. Chu Beijie had to spend a lot of effort to plot conflict between the House of Jing-An and the King of Gui Le in order to drive him away from Gui Le.

He Xia's thoughts were always careful, always ensuring a tightly woven trap existed before making decisions such as unwittingly surrounding the enemy. He would then suddenly attack at the last minute, not letting the enemy have the slightest possibility of escape.

And today, he used his thundering tactics to try obtaining Bai Pingting.

Pingting's heart was bitter. She really wanted to cry, but her lips let out a trace of cold laughter instead. "Take away all the maps and topographical data, I don't need to see them. If we were evenly matched, then we could possibly still struggle a bit. However, in our current situation, we have not one chance of victory."

Her cold eyes glanced at Moran and her voice was calm and collected. "Even though we have no chance of victory, we may not lose."

Not caring about Moran's puzzled face, Pingting sauntered out of the office and stepped down the stairs.

She quickly headed for the residence's entrance,her footsteps gradually slowed down halfway. She seemed to have another thought. Taking a different course, she turned back towards her own room.

Zuiju and Hongqian were waiting nervously. Seeing Pingting walk towards them, they hurriedly walked out of the side room. They greeted her but did not know what to say.

Pingting observed them, knowing that no one could talk. Her heart was alarmed enough as is. There time was no time to comfort them, so she simply asked, "Who here has a crimson coloured dress?"

"I have one," said Hongqian.

"Bring it over." Pingting etered the room and found a comb, which she used to carefully straighten her silk strands of hair until it became one thrilling black waterfall.

Zuiju saw that she was combing her hair and approached her. "I'll help you,"she offered, asking for the comb.

Pingting shook her head. "I'll do it myself."

Before the mirror, she slowly divided her hair into two sections. She wrapped a section around her finger and whirled it which soon became a black ring like a flower.

Pingting looked at the mirror and then her side view. She shook her head in dissatisfaction and let go, allowing her silky black hair to fall once more.

Just then Hongqian entered the room, with that crimson dress she found. She handed it to Pingting saying, "This is a crimson dress, but it's very thin as it's a summer dress."

"That's the exact colour." Pingting took it over, stroked the fabric and noted it was indeed very thin. "Help me put it on."

"How could you wear this on such a cold day?" Zuiju frowned, "I have a purple dress. Even though the colour isn't the same at all, it is much warmer."

Pingting dismissed the idea. "It has to be this colour."

Her eyebrows rose slightly, not letting the others dare challenge her authority. They helped her into it. It was winter. Even if they were inside, Pingting still took off her undergarments, causing her to shiver wildly. Zuiju hurriedly draped a fur-lined coat over her, wrapping her from the outside.

Pingting gave her a look of gratitude and whispered, "I still need to do my hair."

She refused Hongqian and Zuiju's help and sat at the mirror by herself for a long time. Zuiju observed that her expression was full of concentration. While her ten fingers picked and pinched left and right around her hair. Gradually her small bun of hair had become several delicately blossoming black flowers. Both sides were perfectly combed and her hair fell softly on her tender white skin, completing the finishing touches to her appearance.

Hongqian was at one side, quietly watching. She sighed, "Although it's pretty, it's much too troublesome. Thankfully Miss is very dexterous. If it were me, perhaps it'd take much much longer."

Zuiju too, couldn't help commenting, "So pretty. It looks good with Miss' face and eyes. It complements the natural temperament of Miss' skeletal structural. It's a hairstyle designed just for Miss."

Slight colour returned to Pingting's face with just their comments. She looked in the mirror and faintly replied, "It's not combed very well as this is my first time doing it myself." She stood up, thinking how terribly cold it was. She folded her hands against her coat to hide herself inside, away from the wind. She rolled her eyes once before straightening up and walking out the door.

Moran had been standing outside the small building. Seeing Pingting walk over, his expression fixed on her coat. Pingting was very thin. Even though the coat covered everything, he could still see that she was wearing a very thin layer underneath.

Pingting kept her hands inside the cloak. She raised her head to look at Moran but did not stop her footsteps. As she passed him, she whispered. "You, come with me."

She seemed to have decided already, her footsteps without hesitation as she passed through several doorways.

Paranoia was rampant, real or imagined. The guards closely protected the residence and each held a sword while standing straight, eyes wide open. The concentration of their vigilance for movement had increased significantly, but as soon as they saw Pingting's pear blossom-like figure, followed by Moran behind her, they couldn't help look surprised.

Pingting stopped at the entrance, silently staring at the sturdy gate made of steel rods.

Although it was in good condition, it was definitely not enough to withstand one round of He Xia's attacks. It was not one used by the army, so what were the chances of it surviving a siege's weaponry?

Her fist was slightly clenched. No one noticed her shoulder slightly shaking. She took a deep breath of the icy air and closed her eyes.

When she opened her eyes once more, they were full of resolution.

“Open the gate.”

The guards were surprised and glanced at each other.

Moran quickly strode to her side. He lowered his voice, full of anxiety. “Miss Bai...”

“You’re also a battlefield veteran. This place will not last. Rather than having He Xia attack his way in, it’s better to just welcome him in.” She smoothly articulated every word, like crystal raindrops pattered on every guard’s hearts.

The most surprising thing, however, was that the rain that fell washed away the dust in their hearts. Everyone was no longer worried about the outcome of failure and restored the calm composure they had before Chu Beijie.

“Open the door.” She commanded softly once more.

Everyone remembered her proud, straight back view.

They removed the heavy horizontal bolt. The door slowly swung open with a series of loud creaks. Bit by bit, the patch of nothingness that lay beyond the residence, the snowy mountains that gleamed in the sunlight, appeared before their eyes.

Pingting stood in the middle of the entrance, greeting the wind. A gentle light flickered in her eyes as she gazed at the trees and forests ahead. There was an expression difficult to put to words.

The House of Jing-An of the past was so far away yet so close.

Like how her bare feet was separated only by a thin layer of soil from the warm air of the quiet underground.

If one were to gently dig away this thin layer of soil, the air would gush out.

It would gush into her hair, her body, her lips, her flowing blood, her organs, her every pore until they would be warmed and pained at the same time.

Her expression shifted toward the horizon. Who still knew the direction of Gui Le? Who still remembers the green tiles of the Jing-An Ducal Residence?

Dear Duchess, Master’s troops are in the snowy mountain forest opposite of here.

With just one order, the scene would become one of bloody rivers and death, a point of complete heartlessness to the point of no return.

A cold wind blew past them. Pingting turned away her gaze and looked at Moran.

She ground her teeth slightly but her eyes held no hesitation. “On the highest point of this gate, raise a white flag.”

She was just like Chu Beijie. When she had decided something, no one could change her mind. Moran solemnly nodded.

Everyone knew without outside help the residence would be captured sooner or later.

Captured or surrendered was simply the same thing.

The snow-white flag of shame slowly rose towards the highest point of the entrance. It unfolded in the force of the north wind, flapping a sound like cries of dissatisfaction.

Pingting took off her heavy coat, revealing her bright red dress.

Her red dress contrasted her white skin. She stood in her snow, the dress flapping —exciting and beautiful.

Not just Moran but perhaps even Chu Beijie had never seen such a stunning Bai Pingting before.

Just by standing there wordlessly, she had already sucked away the energy of all nature, emptied all sights of the sky and earth.

Grief, concern, unspeakable thoughts of heartbreaking sadness, and the slightest trace of touching warmth were hidden in the depths of her eyes.

Her gaze rested on one place, in the forest mountain not too far away.

The branches were covered with a thick layer of snow, like a silver blanket. The pure white reflection gleamed back at everyone's hearts, which were contrarily full of depression and frustration. Just how many enemies lurked over there?

With just one battle drum, perhaps thousands of soldiers would surge forward, or perhaps millions would overwhelm them.

But Pingting's gaze did not contain fear or anger.

Her expression was surprisingly gentle. The familiar people were there. The people she had been punished with, spent nights guarding with, studied with, admired snow with and played qin with were all people she got along well with.

Her gaze tempted the crowd's like magic. They all turned to the same direction as she, all eyes fixed on the mountain forest.

At first, no movement could be detected in the distance. Gradually, dozens of strong warriors popped out of the snow. They parted silently in the middle, allowing a tall handsome figure behind them to slowly move forward.

Dashing; like a star.

His lips did not move but still seemed to be laughing.

Unlike Chu Beijie's, his handsome face was a less angular but more gentle and romantic.

Yet his hand held the sword, firm as Chu Beijie's.

From the moment he appeared, Pingting's eyes didn't ever waver, just like his gaze that remained on Pingting.

He Xia leisurely ambled towards Pingting. In the snow, he left lines of footsteps of equal length.

Moran's hand was clenched on the hilt of the sword, eyeing him like a hawk much like the other guards. His back was hunched as if prepared to use the fastest speed and most ruthless force to attack him at a moment's notice.

A few trusted confidants wearing casual clothing accompanied He Xia. They protected him from both sides. Every time He Xia took a few steps, the archers would alternate forwards and pull their bow towards the thousands of people around Pingting. They posed but did not fire.

Once the two parties grew close enough to exchange blows, He Xia stopped. He was before Pingting, close enough for her to see the complex struggle and oppression in his glittering eyes.

The cold wind froze the air to ice, freezing the distance between them. He could not take one step forward nor one step back.

It froze their bodies, just as much as it froze their words. It seemed to freeze the taste of smoke as well as the House of Jing-An's past.

He Xia had not considered the mixed feelings and the pain in her eyes when he stood before Pingting.

"Look, Master." In the end, Pingting broke the silence. She smiled openly and pointed her slender fingers at herself. "Isn't it pretty?"

The crimson dress was particularly eye-catching against the pristine whiteness of the snow. This spotless white jolted him back to the tranquil Jing-An Ducal Residence, when a Pingting of around thirteen ran towards him on snow. Her crimson dress seemingly had left wide traces on the snow. She had pouted at him, who was reading in a pavilion. "Master is a liar. This colour is terrible as a dress. I will never wear this again as it's both silly and old-fashioned," she had said while walking away.

"Don't go! It's very pretty, extremely pretty. I'm not lying! Pingting, Pingting, don't go. Let me draw you." He immediately jumped into the snow, stopping her. He cheerfully laughed, "Just one drawing. When you see it, you will know I did not lie."

The snow remained.

Yet the Jing-An Ducal Residence has been reduced to ashes.

He Xia took a deep breath. "You hate wearing crimson red the most."

"But Master likes me wearing this colour the most." Pingting quietly gazed at the hem of the bright dress. She whispered, "Do you still remember the crimson dress I wore in the snow that time?" Her voice was like silk, distant and faraway, befitting of the endless number of stories they shared.

"I remember." He Xia sighed nostalgically. "I also know that right now, you're wearing one for me."

He sighed softly, took off the thick mink cold around his shoulders and stepped forward.

Almost all of the two parties' men were suspicious by this act. The arrows on their strings were nearly whipped forwards.

Yet all he did was gently place the coat on Pingting's shoulder and placed a palm on her cheek, warming her like he used to.

"Look, it's frozen stiff." Even the smile in his lips was the same.

Pingting obediently allowed him to dress and warm up her pale red face. She then heard He Xia murmur, "Why must you do this? Would I not come to see you even if you did not wear this colour? Am I really that heartless that I would completely forget our fifteen years of friendship?"

He studied her pityingly and raised his hand to slowly loosen her hair, letting the strands fall. “You have never combed your hair yourself before. Even if it’s similar, the way I combed it back then was not like this.”

Everyone’s eyes were watchful.

One was the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, the other was the woman of the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

To the observers, this situation was both pure and beautiful as both had the best memories tucked in the depths of their heart. A place that once held no fear had been shattered with just a cough, leaving them with the fragments of reality.

The past and the current seemed to fall.

It seemed that Pingting was still his maid —when they rode galloping horses together, dined together and played ridiculously pointless games together. The soothing yet fragile frame, coupled with her crystal clear eyes and her smiles pleased him since childhood.

At any time, all he had to do was just yell, “Pingting! Pingting!” which would then set off a series of calls in the ducal residence to summon Pingting. Pingting would then hurriedly come after hearing the summoning. She’d look up, her eyes clear and bright and he’d hear, “What’s wrong? I’m busy and don’t have time to be your model.”

As for Chu Beijie, so what about Chu Beijie?

How could he steal away her soul, her heart and their fifteen years of friendship in just a few, countable days?

“Pingting, I miss you.”

“The three hundred thousand soldiers that pressured the King of Dong Lin to transfer Chu Beijie were sent just for you.”

“How is Chu Beijie treating you? He left you just because of a King’s command.”

“He’s not good to you at all, so why lower yourself to him? Wouldn’t you be happy if you live the way we used to?”

He Xia pointed at the trusted elite soldiers behind him. “I have brought these soldiers through the ends of the earth here and endured attacks. Pingting, you understand what this means right? I’ve never wanted to harm you.”

“Does Master mean that you would like me to go with you?” Pingting’s expression drifted as she leisurely asked.

“Do you not want to?”

“How could I?” Pingting’s gaze shifted towards the white flag raised high up which was probably the first sign of disgrace on Chu Beijie’s property. “The white flag has already been raised, so what could Pingting possibly say?” She chuckled softly and glanced at He Xia, her face sideways to him. “Would you like to take away the person? Or would you like to take away the heart?”

He Xia gave a fleeting expression of hurt. He lowered his voice, “Both.”

A trace of a sad, bitter smile escaped from her beautiful lips. Pingting sighed, “Master, how much of this is really for Pingting? You don’t want to use force on me because you want to deliver a bigger blow on Chu Beijie. If he knew that I willingly parted with you, this would mean a much greater loss than losing a battle at the borders to him.” She leisurely sighed a few more times. Her tone firmed, “Fine, as long as you promise me one thing, I will willingly come with you.”

He Xia had been listening to her elegant voice and was surprised at this. He immediately asked, "How long would you like to wait?"

"The sixth."

"Pingting, Chu Beijie won't come back."

"If so, I will go with you." She lifted her index finger to her mouth and bit viciously down on it. Her bright red blood dripped onto the snow and spreaded like plum blossoms suddenly blossoming.

"I, Bai Pingting, swear to the sky that if the Duke of Zhen-Bei does not arrive by the sixth, will willingly go with He Xia, the Prince Consort of Yun Chang. If I violate this oath, then I shall die without proper burial."

All of the men present on the two sides listened to her resounding oath and couldn't help feeling impressed.

A battle was looming with the presence of soldiers and He Xia's identity of importance that was a threat to the country meant that the sooner they left, the better. Regardless of strength, the Duke of Zhen-Bei's men had already raised a flag, so Bai Pingting should just go with them. Why wait for two days?

No one sane would agree to these conditions.

He Xia's voice remained prideful however. He nodded, "Fine. I'll come get you on the sixth."

Moran saw him turn away to leave, and without hesitation, beckoned the guards to protect. As the enemy's arrows remained pointed towards the residence, they retreated.

He watched them gradually retreat back to the forests before realising the hand on the hilt of his sword was soaked with sweat.

Snow covered the vast earth before them, empty and bleak.

Pingting just stood there, staring at the direction where He Xia disappeared.

"Miss Bai?" Moran took a step forwards, his words a loud whisper.

Pingting turned towards him, her eyes almost as clear as crystal. There was a faint sad smile on her lips. "Fifteen years of friendship can only be exchanged for the time of two days." She didn't move, just raised her head and looked towards the east. In a soft voice she asked, "From his words, it seems that the Duke will not be able to hurry back by the sixth. What do you think?"

He Xia hesitated and replied, "He Xia seems to be very sure. Perhaps the King is helping in the capital. If that's the case, I'm afraid..."

"But being the Duke he is, who could stop him if he really wanted to return?" Pingting's tone was relaxed as she whispered, "If he really has me in his heart, then he will definitely rush back by the sixth."

He had to come back.

Alcohol, women, power or force could not stop him.

As long as he remembers our promise, then he would definitely come back to see me.

Zuiju accompanied Hongqian inside the courtyard, their hearts skipping every few beats. They saw the white flag being raised in the distance. Hongqian, whose face was as white as paper, reluctantly snooped around a little, listening carefully for any sounds.

Not one battle cry could be heard.

It seemed that even the wind had been intimidated and was afraid to make any sounds.

They had waited until the strings of their heart felt like snapping before they saw Moran accompanying Pingting back inside. Pingting was as pale as white jade with a trace of exhaustion. The coat on her shoulders was no longer the pure white one she had been wearing when she left but a dark mink. The two then slipped quietly inside. As Pingting was not speaking, Zuiju didn't say anything either as she brought hot tea for her or when helping her to sleep comfortably. When all this was done, she looked at Moran before lifting the door curtain to go outside.

"What's going on? I saw the white flag." Zuiju asked as she opened the doors to look at the mountains. She had a special status as she was an old friend to Moran.

Moran frowned and reported the events one by one.

The development had been surprising. Although it should've been impossible, Bai Pingting had gained the time of two days.

When Zuiju heard that He Xia had immediately agreed, her eyes were suddenly bright. She breathed in deeply and slowly sighed. "No wonder people say that Gui Le's Marquess of Jing-An is the only person that is comparable to our Duke. Such a hearty personality! Doesn't it make you wonder why he doesn't teach Yun Chang's Princess to handle military affairs properly?"

Yet this tactic was one that only Bai Pingting could propose and only one that He Xia would agree to.

Apart from those two, regardless of who was exchanged for another, it would have been an impossible situation.

Moran's thoughts remained full of worries. He frowned, "Miss Bai is fairly relaxed and says that Duke can definitely return by then. But what if the Duke is delayed over there, what should we do then? With the current assets in He Xia's hands, even if we put out lives at stake to fight, we will still be unable to rush out with Miss Bai."

Zuiju was silent for a long time but argued back, "Even if you could rush out with Miss Bai, Miss Bai wouldn't want to go with you. He Xia is risking death by granting her wish, so how could she betray the person she swore to? Not to mention..." She sucked her lip, staring down at her embroidered shoes for a long time. Her voice was a little sad, "Besides, why should she stay here if the Duke doesn't really see her as important and doesn't hurry back?"

That romantic, exquisitely carved Bai Pingting was not an ordinary person.

She could take a hundred times more pain but could not stand sadness.

Chapter 35

The two were secretly upset.

Moran said, "Although He Xia promised not to move until the sixth, we must not underestimate him. I'd better do a few more adjustments to the defence arrangement of this residence."

Zuiju nodded and watched Moran turn to leave. She thought of something and said a soft, "Ah," but stopped herself from calling Moran, letting him leave.

Returning to the room, she saw Hongqian was sitting on a chair taking a nap. Her thoughts were the most shallow and had been recently subjected to much shock. Seeing that Pingting and Moran had safely returned, she realised that the danger had passed and finally slept. Hearing the sound of the door curtain, she slowly opened her eyes and realized Zuiju had returned. She placed a fingertip to her mouth.

"Hush..." She pointed at the inner room, closed her eyes, placed both her hands to one side and tilted her head, imitating a sleeping pose.

Zuiju gave her a look of understanding and quietly crept into the room, quietly probing.

Pingting was lying on the bed, her long hair scattered around. One clump was softly falling from the bed. Her eyes were closed and she seemed to be sleeping.

A thick blanket covered her, but the window was still opened, allowing cold wind to flow inside.

Zuiju whispered, "Such a bad habit ought to be corrected." She quietly tiptoed towards the bedside, carefully reaching out. She had yet to touch the window when she heard a soft voice coming down from below.

"Don't close it. The blowing wind refreshes my mind."

Zuiju lowered her head to look and saw that Pingting had already opened her eyes. How could they be considered sleepy when possessing such brightness?

"It's better to close it as it won't be funny if you get a cold." Zuiju stubbornly closed the window and turned to sit down by the bed. She reached out into the blankets, rummaging for Pingting's slender wrists which she pressed two fingers against to check her pulse. She calmly listened for a while before lightly laughing, "All good."

She returned the hand to its original place before lowering her voice. "I've already heard from Moran. I don't know what to say, really."

Pingting revealed a gentle smile and asked a question in return, "Don't tell me you're worried that the Duke won't be back too?"

Zuiju looked at Pingting in the eye.

She accompanied her teacher when saving lives and was familiar with nobles and officials. She was more or less a friend of all of the ladies of the big families in Dong Lin, perhaps even the concubines of the Royal Residence, yet she had never met someone like Bai Pingting.

Intelligence, joy, and aloofness were soaked into her bones. How could the House of Jing-An produce such a casually elegant He Xia of swords and song while looking after a person like Bai Pingting?

Pingting saw that Zuiju was silent and gently returned her stare.

The two pairs of bright eyes looked at each other silently, as if trying to measure the other's intentions.

Hongqian happened to come in and saw two people staring stupidly at one another. In a surprised voice, she said, “So Miss Bai wasn’t sleeping? I restricted my movements to very small ones so that I wouldn’t wake you. What on earth could you possibly be staring at each other for? A flower can’t be formed from it.”

Zuiju shifted her gaze and turned to look at Hongqian. She half laughed, half scowled, “You’re so noisy, interrupting people when they’re thinking deeply about things.”

Pingting also looked at her, asking, “Why’d you come in?”

“Look at the time,” Hongqian pointed outside. “Seeing that Miss was asleep, I didn’t dare ask before, but aren’t you two hungry?”

Zuiju raised her head to look outside. “True, no wonder I felt hungry. Thanks to all of the suspense today, I completely forgot about eating.”

“The food has been made already, so I’ll bring it over.” Hongqian headed outside.

Although the kitchen’s matron had been shocked all day, her workmanship was still excellent.

Several layers of the food package were brought over. As usual, there were two meat dishes, two vegetable dishes and a few side dishes.

Pingting’s appetite had never been too good. Since she wasn’t in the mood today, she had even less of an appetite than usual. She picked small bits and dropped them with her chopsticks.

Zuiju saw her put down her chopsticks and hurriedly said, “At least drink a bowl of soup and finish a bowl of rice.”

She quickly put in a few slices of meat in Pingting’s bowl, giving her a look.

Pingting had no appetite at all, but seeing Zuiju’s evil look, she touched her lower abdomen before forcing the meal in her bowl down in silence.

Only then did Zuiju smile, satisfied.

After dinner, Zuiju and Hongqian quickly and methodically packed up the food container by loading the plates into it.

Zuiju then said, “Let me go.” She left Hongqian to accompany Pingting and carried the heavy food container across the courtyard when she happened to see the kitchen’s matron coming towards her.

“Miss Zuiju, it is cold. You don’t need to personally return it; I can do it myself.” The matron stopped when she saw Zuiju.

Zuiju handed the food package to her, and took something out from her sleeve. “Nevermind this, I still have to give you the menu for tomorrow. Cook with this prescription and add other ingredients for flavour. Use the best ingredients and don’t forget to use the right amount.”

All of the people in the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence obeyed her words. The matron looked at the recipe under the moonlight and said, “Such clear instructions. Good work, Miss Zuiju. You’re meticulous enough to even cover diet. No wonder Miss Bai’s face seems to be much healthier than before. However...” The matron’s tone shifted, her expression becoming serious, “The acutiloba on this recipe has been used by Miss Bai a few days ago, so the kitchen has currently run out. The kitchen never had peony petals to begin with, but there’s some aged aster.”

Zuiju replied, “This mustn’t be delayed. Even if I explained, you wouldn’t understand. Just quickly collect or buy some according to my prescription.”

“Geez, Miss must be confused. Who could possibly leave the residence right now? The security of the entrance is even tighter than the capital’s entrance.”

Only then did Zuiju remember that soldiers surrounded them. She slapped her hand against her forehead, “Indeed I must be confused. Speaking of that, does the kitchen have enough resources to last until the sixth?”

“The stocked rice is enough to last a year. It’s unlikely that anyone would die of starvation, but there aren’t enough vegetables. Even though there is a small vegetable garden at the back and poultry, Miss has to think about how many people there are in this residence. Forget the women, they don’t eat much at all, but how could those well-built guards stay away from having a huge bowl of meat and rice? I reckon the meat and vegetables will only last a day.”

The matron looked around them and went closer, lowering her voice, “The pork is sent here every three days and we have already finished all of it in these last two days, so there will be no more pork starting tomorrow. We haven’t any fresh fish either, so chicken and duck will have to do. General Chu said this wasn’t anything of importance and ordered not to inform Miss Bai. I’m telling you this, but please don’t tell her.”

Zuiju nodded. “I’ll come with you to the kitchen, to see what else is left. I’ll see and write another prescription from them. Matron, make sure everyone follows them. No matter how many soldiers are circling outside, I only care that the best possible food is delivered to Miss Bai.”

“Of course. As long as the kitchen has those things in stock, then each will be delivered without error, exact to your prescription.”

The two people slowly walked in the snow. The moon came out of the clouds, but it was not as bright as the previous days. Its yellow light was slightly hazy. Their feet plodded through the somewhat thinner layer of snow. The snow creaked and crunched as they crushed it into pieces under their footsteps.

As they arrived at the kitchen, they sighted a sudden movement.

“What?”

Zuiju gave a frightened cry as they saw a glowing red light at the gates to the residence. It seemed to be the combination of several flames from fiery torches.

The sound of the heavy door swinging open in the distance was heard. Although it was soft, it brought a dangerous atmosphere.

The matron looked at the flame in the sky, her lips quivering. “Oh God, don’t tell me the attackers are inside?”

Zuiju remained silent and plucked up her courage to leave the kitchen building. She took a side pathway to reach the entrance of the residence. She carefully went towards it, hiding behind the walls. Zuiju saw the person holding the flame outside the entrance. At this time of night, she guessed the person had to be one of He Xia’s men.

Not long later, the door slowly closed, shutting out the flame from the outside, only leaving a dimmer light within the residence.

Zuiju saw Moran with two other guards push a heavily guarded cart, passing the wall she was standing at.

“Who’s there?” Moran suddenly said. The swords of the other two guards were immediately unsheathed.

“It’s me.”

Moran sighed in relief and was a little reprimanding. “Why are you not accompanying Miss Bai at such a time? Isn’t there enough chaos out here already?”

The two guards made sure it was Zuiju before sheathing their weapons.

“I was planning to go to the kitchen, but came here when I heard movement. What were those people doing?”

“Sending things.”

“Sending things?”

“Fresh meat, fresh fish and various differently coloured fruits. I’ve already checked that the cart is not hiding people or weapons.” Moran laughed bitterly and pointed at the cart packed full of things. “You came at the right time. After getting these to the kitchen, use your needle to test if anything’s strange.”

Zuiju looked at the full cart and couldn’t help sigh. “Knowing He Xia, there is no way he’d use such a tactic, but I will examine them properly.”

The two guards helped Zuiju to wheel the cart to the kitchen and unloaded everything. In addition to the pork, beef, fresh fish and vegetables, there were a number of other rare things.

There were a few jars of authentic Gui Le dishes, seasoned dried rare fish, Bei Mo’s delicacies befitting for a queen as well as a plate of both crispy and soft desserts.

The other matrons of the kitchen stood aside while watching Zuiju examine the dishes with a needle. They couldn’t help praising when they saw that each were exquisitely made by the finest, most talented chefs possible. “Just their appearances comply with the saying that Gui Le’s desserts are superb.”

Apart from that, there was also a gilded box wrapped with several layers of silk. It had been placed in the innermost section of the cart. Zuiju unwrapped one layer after the other and realised the contents were not food but various little items women used.

There was a clamshell which contained hand cream of the finest quality, as well as a small

Ay leasy a dozen of small, multicoloured pebbles were placed at the bottom of the box. Zuiju looked at the three objects that were inside, her gaze not moving. She sighed in both praise and envy.

By the time she had examined, everything the sky had already brightened. Zuiju’s back ached with exhaustion. She told the kitchen servants, “These are all fine, eat as much as you like. He Xia really is a good man to even prepare acutiloba that nourishes women. Forget changing the prescription, just use the one from last night.”

“But we still don’t have peony petals.”

“Oh well, just don’t add it. It doesn’t really matter about the peony petals. The acutiloba is the most important.” Zuiju replied, tiredly massaging her shoulders. She then headed for the small building with the gilded box.

Hongqian was already up and was stretching out on the snow. Seeing Zuiju, she asked, “I didn’t see you yesterday evening at all. Before Miss went to sleep, she asked me to go ask what was holding you up at the kitchen.”

“Where is she?”

“Still sleeping.” Hongqian beckoned towards the door with a lift of her chin. “I slept in the same room as her last night. She kept on tossing and turning, unable to sleep. Ah, I heard the guards saying that we’re still surrounded by soldiers? Hadn’t they retreated already when Miss Bai and General Chu returned yesterday? And what’s this about a promise on the sixth? What are we to do if the Duke does not return by the sixth?”

Zuiju lowered her voice, “Even if you wanted to control it, you can’t, so it’s better not to ask.”

Hongqian had thought that the guard she always joked with her was just trying to scare her. With that, her face paled, understanding the current danger.

Zuiju knew that the current situation was even worse than what Hongqian was thinking but refused to say any more. She patted her on the shoulder and strode up the steps, entering Pingting’s room.

Pingting had awoken long ago and had kicked the blankets to one side. A lilac coat hung from her shoulders as she lazily knelt on the bed. She tilted her head to one side, her hand stroking down her hair. When seeing Zuiju enter with the gilded box, she looked at it, asking, “What’s that?”

Zuiju knew that she was feeling restless and wanted to tease her. She placed the gilded box at the head of the bed, mischievously smiling, “Guess. If you get it right, then you have my admiration.”

Pingting looked at the box, her light gaze moved aside. “Something annoying again...”

She sighed, not bothering with Zuiju and opened it herself.

She lightly glanced at the three objects in the gilded box and picked up the comb. She stared at it and beyond. She slowly dragged out, “I used to use this a lot at the Jing-An Ducal Residence back then.”

She placed the comb down and didn’t touch the other two objects. She grabbed a handful of the pebbles and carefully counted them before putting them back in. Pingting laughed bitterly, “I used fifteen years of friendship to bargain with him and he uses fifteen years of friendship to trap me.” She slammed the box shut and slipped off the bed.

After washing with hot water, Zuiju approached her to comb her hair. Zuiju held onto the silky black strands and twisted them into a peony bun. She saw that the reflected face was drained of both happiness and worry. She had no clue what she was thinking, just like a thin layer of fog developing on the mirror surface.

“Miss! Why aren’t you saying anything?”

Pingting was silent for a long time before saying, “I am very tired.”

Zuiju replied, “Since you’re so tired, you should sleep since nothing is happening anyway. I’ll get the kitchen to make some red bean porridge and boil it. That way, it can immediately be served when you wake up.”

Pingting shook her head.

When Zuiju had just put down the comb. Pingting looked into the bronze mirror and stood up, lifting the curtain to go outside. Zuiju hurriedly followed her outside. Pingting entered the side room and took out the pot of plum blossom petals out.

“Let me carry it.”

Pingting turned sideways so Zuiju would take it with her hands but then shook her head. She carried the pot down the steps and walked towards the corner where Hongqian had swept the snow away the day before. Although there wasn’t much snow a night had passed with a thin layer of frost

Pingting placed the pot down, picked up a broom and swept the floor before grabbing a shovel.

Zuiju didn't say a word. She actually felt a little afraid. She stood helpless at one side, saying, "Be careful not to strain your back."

Pingting didn't hurry. She used the shovel to dig little by little. The uppermost layers of soil were the hardest but after that, it was gradually softer and much easier to dig through.

Several moments later, a small hole began to form. Fine beads of sweat formed on Pingting's forehead. Her cheeks were several shades redder than before.

She still did not hurry. Pingting placed the shovel down, quietly resting for a while to allow her breath to calm. She then picked up the pot beside her and placed it neatly into the hole. She adjusted left and right until she was satisfied. Pingting did not think it was dirty as she reburied the pot using her own two hands.

After this final use of effort, Pingting breathed out deeply and raised head, smiling at Zuiju who was still standing one side. "All that's left is the cooking fire on top."

Her black eyes brightened, a smile in her eyes lifting like a wave with a gentle splash.

Zuiju did not quite understand why her heart seemed to stop for a while. A sour taste stayed in her nose as if preparing to cry. She hurriedly wiped her eyes and pasted on a cheerful face, "Sure, I'll bring the firewood."

She got the firewood from the kitchen. The task was exchanged with Hongqian, who then brought them to the new burial site. She lit the pile. Not long later, the dry firewood began to crackle. Its fiery red glow flickered in the snow. It coloured the three people's cheeks, nice and warm.

Pingting sweated a lot, but she seemed to be a lot better. She gazed at the flames, suddenly saying, "Never just stand around a fireplace. Ask the kitchen for some meat and salt. Let's eat some roasted meat."

Although Hongqian was worried about the surrounding troops, she understood the concept that pleasure can also exist in pain. She replied, "I'll get it."

She soon returned, crunching the snow with her footsteps while carrying a heavy basket in her hands.

"Pork loin, chicken wings, cleaned duck legs and two fishes with removed intestines and head. I don't know what Miss would like to roast, so I just got the kitchen matrons to prepare these." Hongqian settled the basket down, spreaded out a blue blanket in the snow and took out the items one by one. "I've also got the salt and allspice. The matrons said that eating roast alone was too dry and will bring some premade soup shortly."

Pingting clapped her hands, "Well done Hongqian, very thoughtful. If I were a general, I'd appoint you as at least a back up advisor no matter what."

She sat on the stone bench with an additional thick shawl on her shoulders. Zuiju was afraid that she was cold and had gone back to the room to retrieve it.

Hongqian saw Pingting's smile. Her heart was much more relaxed. She laughed, "That's not it. The matrons said not to hold the meat while roasting but use something to skewer them instead, so I have a few thin iron bars here."

She lowered her head and took out a few thin iron bars from the basket. It had been properly washed while the accompanying guaze was new.

With all preparations complete, the three people sat around the fire ready to enjoy this winter barbeque.

They picked up a thin bar and threaded slices of meat or fish onto it before placing on top of the fire. The red flame softly roasted. The results were both fresh and interesting. The more they did it, the more fun and interesting it seemed.

“My father has a hunter’s stove. When I used to accompany him to hunt, I played with it a few times.” Hongqian appeared to have a lot of experience as she rotated the bar in her hand. She sighed, “After getting into the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence, such times were no more.”

“How’d you enter the Ducal Residence? The Duke bought you?”

Hongqian hurriedly shook her head. “The Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence has no need to buy people. People would do anything to be admitted. There’s enough food and drinks to go around here, less beating and the Master is our Duke. When my father does hunt something, I’d be half full, but when he doesn’t, I’d be without a meal. It’s a harsh life, but thankfully I was lucky enough to squeeze in here. Occasionally I’d take a few things to my father.”

This was the first time Zuiju had ever heard such a thing from Hongqian. She didn’t hesitate to ask, “Don’t you miss your father after coming to such a remote place?”

“How could I know? My father was sadly not blessed. He died just three years after my entry in the Ducal Residence. The Duke noted family relationships when he left the capital. He knew I had nowhere to go, so he took me along.”

Zuiju then understood why the number of young maids in the residence was very little, yet there were a great number of the older matrons. All of them were old and had no place to return to.

She was roasting duck leg. The meat was thick, so she had to wait patiently until it was fully cooked. Her gaze rested on Pingting, and she gasped, “This fiery red is harsh to the eyes. Roasted food will raise your temperature. This isn’t good to your body at all.”

The fish in Pingting’s hands happened to be cooked. Despite her first time making it personally and her thoughts in the distance, it was still roasted to a golden crisp. Hearing Zuiju’s words, she carefully slid the fish off the bar and put it on the plate. She handed it to them, “Since it’s like that, I won’t have any then. You two may have it.”

Hongqian stared enviously at the fish. She cheered loudly and handed her own wire to Zuiju, “Hold this for me.”

She then took the dish filled with tasty roasted fish.

Zuiju saw that she was thinking the best for her unborn child and smiled admiringly at her. She offered a few words of comfort, “Even though you say you won’t have any, there are still other delicious food. I’ve asked the matrons to prepare steamed pork trotters with acutiloba and red dates.”

Just as she said this, a matron had already entered the courtyard with a food package. She saw everyone was happily playing about and smiled, “Be careful of your hands. Being poked by the wire of the gauze mat and tip of the bars is very sore. I tried it in the kitchen several times before this.”

She opened the food package on the blue cloth and served a bowl to each of the three people. Pingting was indeed served with steamed pork trotters with acutiloba and red dates.

Pingting held onto the spoon. She watched the two people roast their food while steadily eating the contents in her bowl. She smiled.

The activity continued for nearly an hour. Both the food had been depleted, and the firewood was in its final flickers. The three stood up and threw water to extinguish the fire.

“Should we remove the pot?” Hongqian asked.

“No need. It’s better for it to soak up the taste of mud, so wait until the Duke returns before collecting.”

Like that, the first half of the day passed. The following half was much slower. Zuiju and Hongqian gossiped in a room, while Pingting went to take a nap. She slept for almost three hours. By the time she had woken, it was already dark.

She hazily got up and pushed the window open. The evening wind was not strong, but the cloud layer was much too thick. She couldn’t see the moon at all.

“Zuiju? Zuiju?” She anxiously called.

Zuiju walked inside, asking, “You’re awake?”

“What time is it? Has the moon passed a half? Is it already the sixth?”

Zuiju paused for a moment. She slowly walked over and sat on the bed. “Miss Bai, the sky has not been dark for long. It is still the fifth,” she replied.

Hearing her words, the anxiety from seeing the sky’s colour lifted. She faintly replied, “Oh,” before her body relaxed, and she fell back onto the bed.

Zuiju then asked, “The kitchen brought dinner over but I rarely see you sleeping so soundly so I told Hongqian not to bother you. It’s currently simmering on the stovetop in the side room. Now that you’re awake, you might as well have some.”

Pingting seemed to be thinking about something. At first, she shook her head at Zuiju’s words, but then thought about it and nodded instead. “Bring it over, I’ll have some.”

Hongqian served up the hot meal.

Pingting managed to finish half a bowl before frowning, “I just can’t eat any more.” She placed her chopsticks down.

Zuiju saw Pingting really couldn’t eat any more based from her expression and knew her mind could not be changed. She softened her voice, “That’s fine.”

Hongqian packed away the dishes and went out of the room with Zuiju. She stopped outside the door, asking, “She was all happy-go-lucky this morning. Why has she forgotten over a nap and become like this? It seems that great intelligence is no good. They have very bizarre emotions.”

Zuiju hurriedly silenced her, lowering her voice as she chattered back, “You know what? If you were her, you’d probably have long gone crazy.”

Hongqian poked out her tongue and entered the side room.

Zuiju stood by herself outside the door and looked at the patch of pale snow on the courtyard. A cold gust of wind seemingly stroked her neck. Just how Pingting would put it, it was quite refreshing.

Pingting wasn’t the only one upset. Her heart seemed to be clawed by a cat too.

The worst thing, she knew, was the dangerous path that led to an abyss-like ridge laying before them.

The war between the four countries was intensifying. It used to be the Dong Lin army attacking Gui Le and Bei Mo, but now it was an alliance of Yun Chang and Bei Mo's army attacking Dong Lin.

Endlessly causing loss of life.

Everyone understood what the danger meant, even the most stupid of the nobles.

Her teacher, Huo Yunan, was born a noble. He knew Dong Lin's upperclass and thoroughly understood their reactions.

Who could guarantee that their country would not collapse under the enemy country's power? Who could stand the eventual demise of their home?

A country was a home, but only with a country could one have a home.

Who wasn't like that?

Zuiju deeply sighed, her chest so stuffy that it was sore. She ground her teeth and determinedly undid her clock, letting the cold wind flow inside until the lava churning inside be frozen. She shivered three or four times before buttoning up her clothes and took the hot tea from the side room to Pingting who she then helped to sleep.

That night, she slept in the other bed in Pingting's room.

She suddenly heard a voice in the middle night. Zuiju got up and rubbed her eyes, seeing that Pingting had woken and sitting on the bed.

"Why have you woken again, Miss Bai?" Zuiju got off the bed, and walked until she was beside her. Her voice was soft as she questioned.

Pingting was silently staring at the sky outside the window. Her gaze remained fixed as she answered, "The moon has come out."

Zuiju followed her gaze and looked up at the sky. The moon had indeed come out of the clouds some time earlier, but it was dim, listlessly bleak.

Studying the position carefully, she realised that it had passed half the sky.

The moon had passed half the sky.

The sixth had come...

Zuiju's heart sunk, but her words remained warm. "There is still one day and the Duke must be hurrying back."

Pingting's voice was like calm waves. "He must be on the horse, very, very tired. His throat must be dry and hoarse, completely covered dust except for his shoulders where snow has accumulated."

Zuiju could only think that her voice was drifting from the ends of the earth. It was like a leisurely pluck of a qin string that trembled in to beckon the flowers and trees. She lowered her head to look at her expression but could not find any clues.

She then draped the blankets around Pingting, accompanying her by sitting at the head of the bed. The two watched the moon moving. More than an hour had passed before Zuiju softly encouraged, "Go to sleep."

Pingting obediently lay down onto the bed and closed her eyes. Zuiju sighed in relief and got off the bed to return to her own. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Pingting's eyes flicker open.

"What?"

Pingting glanced at Zuiju, laughing ruefully. "Nothing." She then obediently closed her eyes once more.

That night at the Hua Residence, Chu Beijie had thought she was Lady Hua's mute maid and had said, "Sleep," when seeing she was sick.

That person who did whatever he wanted, without the slightest care for the world's social conventions. He had not known her well, yet he'd carried her by the waist and took her into her room, placing her on the bed before clumsily covering her with blankets.

His stiff "Sleep" was just like a command he gave to his soldiers, yet it was memorable now that she thought about it.

He will come back; he will definitely be back.

Her slender palm clenched into a tight fist under the blankets.

If such deep love could not withstand such a test and simply melt into running water, what was the point of the two swords, Parting Soul and Divine Spirit?

The moon had passed half the sky.

The sixth had arrived.

Chu Beijie was wildly galloping forwards.

The morning north wind whistled in his ear.

In his life, he had galloped so wildly numerous times, letting his horse's four hooves fly off. He'd indulge himself in the ride with his cloak fluttering in the wind. Even mountains were unable to stop his approaching figure.

Galloping across the plains was a heroic pleasure.

But at this time, he could not feel any pleasure.

The wind blew hard at him. It was painful like sword wounds on his face. Not only did the wind tear at his face, it tore at his heart.

His heart was like a grill on fire which remained suspended in the air.

The secluded residence was a place inaccessible to his eyes.

Yet the faint fragrance of plum blossoms lingered in his heart.

Chu Beijie deeply understood the King's intention. He knew from the way his Brother did everything he could to lengthen his stay at the capital that an irresistible force must've headed towards the secluded residence.

How could Pingting's white jade hands that played qin possibly return the King of Dong Lin's challenge of war?

Was his thin figure heading towards the dazzling white of a sword?

The soft body that he couldn't hug enough of, the handsome little face that he couldn't look enough of, the clear singing voice he couldn't hear enough of...

...Why did those wretched men refused to spare her, gently let go of her?

She had secluded herself.

She no longer cared about the affairs of the outside.

She had had enough sorrow and had been hurt over and over again. She just wanted to do things like the old times, and if she could, be a satisfied woman.

As Chu Beijie's woman.

"Pingting is not greedy, just hopes that Duke will come to see Pingting once before heading out to the battlefield. On Duke's birthday, Pingting wants to tell Duke something very important."

This was a very simple wish.

A wish that even normal men could grant.

Yet he was not a normal man. He was Chu Beijie, Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei.

Chu Beijie raised his whip and crazily brought it down, his eyes bloodshot. The wind continued to harshly cut his face, not offering any comfort for the immense irritation in his heart.

A dirty mix of snow and mud scattered on the sides of the long road in the middle that extended forwards, seemingly boundless.

The return home seemed longer than ever.

Chu Beijie rode on, his gaze fixed at the horizon.

Was Pingting still safe, beyond the clouds?

A flag appeared in the distance, jumping into his view. There was a group of horses and men moving towards him. Chu Beijie studied the flag which opened in the wind, to read the familiar character for "Mu".

Chu Beijie's heart skipped a beat. He whipped his horse which was already foaming at its mouth. He surged towards the group, abruptly pulled back his horse, yelling "Why is Chen Mu here?" He had not drunk any water for a long time, so his voice was very hoarse.

Seeing Chu Beijie, he hurriedly gathered his soldiers forward. He dismounted and bowed, "Duke, Chen Mu is here!"

"How dare you leave the Dragon Tiger Barracks you're in charge of?"

Chen Mu replied, "I received the King's Order five days ago to transfer to Luo Meng and report to the Duke of Fu-Lang and is now returning to the capital to report to the King."

"Who is currently managing the Dragon Tiger Barracks?"

"According to the King's Order, managing rights have been temporarily transferred to General Fen Min representing the Duke of Fu-Lang."

General Fen Min received orders from the Duke of Fu-Lang. Even if Pingting used the Precious Divine Soul Sword, her identity was not enough to mobilise the Dragon Tiger Barracks.

The King of Dong Lin had taken extreme measures against his own brother.

Chu Beijie's fury attacked both his heart and mind, his eyes dizzily blurry.

Pingting had no hope for help, apart from him.

Knowing Pingting's intelligence, she would definitely remember the promise on the sixth and would do everything to delay the enemy until his return.

Wait for me, you have to wait for me!

Chu Beijie's palms were full of red blisters, but he did not feel any pain. He suddenly seized the reins and sat up straight.

Chen Mu had followed him onto the battlefield for many years. Seeing his expression, he knew that he had already gone at full speed for a long time. He handed him a water sac, "Please have some water, Duke. Is Duke rushing towards a battlefield emergency? No soldier or horse can withstand such a rabid journey."

Chu Beijie took over the sac and drained it dry in a series of gulps, before looking back at the three thousand soldiers that had galloped with him for two nights and a day.

Since leaving the capital, they had whipped their fast horses several times, moving at full speed. They had not rested at all and were exhausted. The marks of the reins were bloodstains of their hands. A few dozen were completely unable to stand it and had fallen off their horses.

He had led soldiers for several years but never displayed such lack of care to them.

Chu Beijie's expression fell as he turned back. He asked Chen Mu, "How many men have you got?"

"Not many, just one thousand seven hundred. All of them are my best."

"Give them to me." Chu Beijie took the command flag and raised it high in the air, yelling, "I am commanding all of the country's troops, so all soldiers here, listen! Among the three thousand, those who can't stand pain and those whose horses can't last, go with Chen Mu to the capital. Chen Mu's one thousand and seven hundred men are also now in my command and we shall immediately set off." He dismounted, and leapt onto Chen Mu's energetic horse, lowering his voice, "Lend me your horse."

"Where is the Duke hurrying to?"

"Before the moon passes halfway of the sixth, I must hurry back to my secluded residence."

Chen Mu was surprised at this. "It is already the sixth and there are just then hours left. How could you possibly hurry back?"

Chu Beijie did not answer. He gathered the reins, tested the horse before bolting away.

Chen Mu didn't know the specifics of what was happening, but he knew that the situation was an emergency. As he watched Chu Beijie's back disappear rapidly into the distance, he ground his teeth and stopped his vice.

"I shall go with the Duke and you lead the tired soldiers back to the capital. Give me your horse." Chen Mu mounted on it, brought down the whip and chased after the cavalry soldiers.

A cloud of yellow dust blew into sky on the unpaved road.

The sixth.

Pingting, my birthday has already arrived.

The residence's atmosphere was a fog that prevented people from breathing.

The mountains and forests beyond remained covered in white. The moon had already retreated, while the a whisp of sunlight peeped out of the clouds, creating a heavy light that did not seem to lighten the tension.

Snowflakes had begun to drift down again.

Numerous and sparse, small bits of snow circled and helplessly trembled in the snow.

A light qin sound was not diffused by the snowflakes. It went beyond the wall, untouched like a rainbow on a cloudy, outcast day.

Pingting was touching the qin.

Now that the sixth had arrived, perhaps the surrounding soldiers with swords had become closer?

It was the sixth. That back view like a mountain and his hearty laugh full of heroism had been born on this kind of snowy day.

He was blessed by the Gods.

The Gods had given him a well-rounded life. He had a strong, healthy body, a straight nose, black pupils full of vigour and had innate dignity and self-confidence.

The Gods had created a rare entity known as Chu Beijie, so that she couldn't help herself but be distracted by him and be conquered.

Today was the sixth.

Pingting plucked a string with her thumb.

She had a deep, special bond with the qin. The qin was her voice, and she was its sound.

Only by letting her two hands softly pressing on the thin strings, could she close the troubles of her mind. She closed her eyes carefreely and immersed herself in her memories

She remembered clearly, the vivid memories that surfaced.

The beating heart she had first felt through the curtains remained.

She seemed to have returned to the chase in the narrow valley. Chu Beijie had pressed towards her on his horse, wrapped his arms around her waist, stopped her, and waited for her reply.

His chest had been boiling warm, and his heart was jumping loudly, thundering against her ear.

And then, when he hadn't left, he'd held the bowl of soup, clumsily feeding her. He'd encouraged her to sleep, accompanied her while she watched the stars and moon.

Rivalry, anger, and gratitude, it was a sweet predicament and a heartbreaking one too.

How could he not love her?

How could he break his promise and forget it?

How could he just cruelly leave her just for his unstoppable flow of heroic blood to protect his country?

Beijie, if Pingting is truly the most important person in your heart, then no matter how big the world is, what could possibly stop your movement?

I have buried a pot of Locked Away Goodies waiting for your return.

Zuiju stood at one side, her hands lowered as she quietly watched Pingting's back view. That back was very frail and weak, but her posture was straight. It seemed that a steel frame propped up the thin flesh.

Zuiju listened.

The sound of the qin was like a speech, as if reporting every single event that had occurred. Even if it was not a personal experience to others, they could empathise the grief behind it.

Yet in such a cold, chaotic situation, the tone remained clear.

Was the country or feelings more important?

Would one rather protect the universal feeling of love or protect one's own country?

Not daring to touch the matters in the heart was a fear like a needle posed high in the air which pierced at Zuiju's organs, causing a deep sorrow.

Humans were not inanimate objects and could not be heartless.

The thin strings had become a strangling weapon, torturing her until she broke into a cold, blood-like sweat.

No longer able to stand the piercingly harsh qin sound, Zuiju stepped forward, trying to restrain her emotions. She whispered, "Miss, you should stop. The lunch has been sent a while ago."

Pingting pressed her fingers onto the qin, causing the sound to suddenly stop. She lifted her head, her eyes bright as they flickered towards Zuiju.

“No matter what, at least eat a little.” Zuiju avoided her gaze and helped her up.

Hongqian deftly set up the dishes on the table.

Pingting scanned the table and her gaze stopped. She was shocked to realise that all sorts of different Gui Le dishes had been placed on the table, a variety of delicacies and ordinary dishes. She sat down on the table, squeezed to pick up something and then placed it down.

“All of these are Gui Le dishes personally made by He Xia.” Pingting was silent for a long time and opened her mouth once more. “He sure shows great determination.”

Her sense of danger pressed down on her heart, without barrier.

Hongqian could barely breathe in this heavy silence and boldly offered, “Although the residence is surrounded by soldiers, seeing the Marquess of Jing-An’s latest actions, I’d say that he remembers his old friendship with Miss Bai. Even if...” She was suddenly warned by Zuiju with a zip of her mouth and realised what she had said, immediately closing her mouth.

Pingting did not blame her. A bitter smile played on her lips as she said, “And how much heartfelt remembrance of old friendship is worth?”

It seemed that perhaps He Xia could accept anyone as the owner of Bai Pingting, except for one – Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie, the only person under the skies who could make He Xia feel afraid.

Chu Beijie, also the only person under the skies who could make He Xia feel jealous.

If the world was a battlefield, how could a contest between old enemies be limited to the smoke of the battlefield?

The snowflakes floated around outside the room. Occasionally one would follow the movement of the door curtain and crashed into the warm room, willingly melt into winter tears.

The head of the sun hung directly upwards, causing slight shadows eastwards.

A half of the sixth had already passed.

Just a half. Twelve hours left.

Translation Notes:

- “As smart as snow” (ch28): This is a very common metaphor in Chinese. (I don’t know why or how this metaphor came to be, so I really just left it for humour here.)
- “Tail-burnt guqin” (ch28): One of the four greatest guqin of China, with the most famous “history”.
- “Threshold” (ch28): The strip of wood/stone at the bottom of a doorway. A raised threshold is/was popular in Chinese architecture and the taller it is, the more prestigious the family is.

Book Four

"Red Souls"

Chapter 36

He Xia was located on a high ledge of the mountain, gazing eastwards with his hands behind his back.

In the heavy snow, in the quiet residence underneath his eyes, hid a person called Pingting.

Pingting, his maid of fifteen years, his playmate, and music critic. She who accompanied him as he read, watched over his sword practices, and clapped while cheering.

Who could easily give up fifteen years? From cute little children to a well-bred lady, Bai Pingting of the Jing-An Ducal Residence was also one of Gui Le's two famous qin players. She had truly been a budding flower in the valleys.

So many people had looked out for her; so many people had praised her.

He had quietly protected, cherished and took her to all sorts of places like the battlefield. He took her to see the amoured calvary and the dancing sandstorms.

She was supposed to be his. In these circumstances, she was his.

But he'd never thought he'd be forcing her to stay.

His Pingting was a phoenix with brightly coloured wings who waited for a man of indomitable spirit to take her by the hand and from there, unite.

That was her wish, her happiness until the end of the world.

Only He Xia, rather than Chu Beijie, should have the greatest portion of Pingting's heart.

Yet the one who had stolen her heart was Chu Beijie.

It could be anyone, anyone apart from Chu Beijie.

How could he allow his Bai Pingting to be with Chu Beijie, his sworn enemy? How could she stargaze with him, talk about life with him, sing for him and play qin for him?

He couldn't accept it. His gentleness as he endured parting with Bai Pingting was exchanged for someone as cheap as Chu Beijie.

He could feel the snowflakes flying with the wind.

The sky was almost dark. It was already the sixth today.

"Master?" Dongzhuo walked to the high place and stopped ten feet behind He Xia.

"Dongzhuo, your voice is both heavy and sad." He Xia's voice became serious as he asked, "Do you think Chu Beijie will hurry back in time?"

"No."

"Are you upset that Chu Beijie is unable to hurry back?"

Dongzhuo shook his head, hesitating. He took his time before looking up and saying, "Master, please order us to attack. The residence has very little ability to defend and with Master's skill, it isn't difficult to capture Pingting alive. When she comes back with us, we can naturally persuade her to change her mind."

He Xia did not answer. His back, illuminated by the setting sun in the west, appeared very distant.

"Master, don't you feel any pity for her since we grew up together?" Dongzhuo had an unbearably sad feeling in his chest from watching He Xia's back. He knelt down and bashed his head onto the ground, crying, "Master, you know that Chu Beijie is unable to return, yet why do make Pingting's heart break by waiting?"

A dark light flashed in the depths of He Xia's raven-black eyes, a twisted pain that mercilessly surfaced. It quickly skimmed over his eyes and was gone.

"Not only do I need her heart to break," He Xia's eyes reflected the little dots of fire over at the residence as he grinded his teeth, "I need her to lose all hope in Chu Beijie."

As night fell on the residence, it became even quieter.

Even the outskirts of a graveyard could not be more silent. Not even the slightest sound of the snowflakes flying in the air could be heard. It seemed like an illusion to the eyes.

Like a dream. When one reached a hand, the dream dispersed, leaving emptiness.

Pingting watched the east.

Time was ruthless, slipping away little by little from her slender fingers.

She had been staring out there for a long time, not blinking at all, as if this was the most important thing of her life since birth.

The east was where Chu Beijie would return from. She could not see the main, straight road to the east since it was blocked by the mountain forests, where He Xia and his men were camped. Pingting did not worry. They could stop Chu Beijie's progress

Today was the sixth.

The moon had already risen, yet where was Chu Beijie?

Zuiju quietly opened the curtain. She had been standing outside the door for a long time, long enough to feel that the date of the sixth had been imprinted into her heart.

She approached Pingting, peeking at the beautiful and dignified, turned face in the moonlight. It sharply stabbed at her heart, causing her to momentarily lose her balance.

“Miss Bai...”

Pingting turned towards her and smiled. The collected smile was more heartbreaking than hysterical crying.

But this thing had become something that had to be said now.

Zuiju stared at her, not letting any hesitation into her eyes. She felt a cold north wind sweep into her chest. It was cold enough to freeze her solid.

She thought her words carefully before opening her mouth. “Because of the death of the two princes, the King is currently without an heir. It would be good if the King’s other concubines are able to give birth to a prince that can succeed the throne. If not, the Duke will one day become the owner of Dong Lin.”

Just a few phrases sent Zuiju’s chest heaving as if fearing that her own will was not strong enough. She didn’t dare let her gaze waver and continued to firmly look at Pingting.

“Go on,” replied Pingting in a light voice.

“If Miss’ unborn child is a boy, then he will be the oldest son of the Duke.”

“Zuiju,” Pingting’s eyes finally became serious as they rested on her face, “what are you trying to say?”

Zuiju stiffened and bowed her head in deep thought for a few moments. She suddenly bit hard on her lip, letting the bloody taste flow through her teeth. She lowered her voice, “Miss clearly understands that this child’s identity is important to Dong Lin. He Xia is a formidable man, so Miss must not ever let the Duke’s flesh and blood fall into his hand.” Her words were straight to the point, no room for disagreement. She turned towards the bowl of warmed medicine on the table behind her and brought it to Pingting.

Pingting’s gaze fell on the murky black concoction, and her first reaction was to take a step back.

“Miss, your child is very young, and the Duke does not know yet. You and the Duke are still young.” Zuiju carried the medicine and took another menacing step.

Pingting’s vision was suddenly blurred. She protected her lower abdomen and hurriedly took four or five steps back until she met the wall. As her backbone hit the cold wall, she managed to calm down. She stood up a little straighter, looked at the medicine and said, “By the end of the sixth, the Duke will definitely hurry back.”

“And what if he doesn’t?”

Pingting ground her teeth, stressing each syllable, “He will definitely be back.”

“But what if he really can’t hurry back in time?” Zuiju hardened her heart, remaining ruthless.

The silence was choking, overpowering everything.

Pingting glared hard at Zuiju.

Her nails had dug into her palms, oblivious to pain.

Her eyes were no longer rippling gentle waves. They were more like flowing black mercury gradually solidifying into black stones. Her eyes were strong and decisive with the faint flickering of light.

“If he really doesn’t arrive in time,” Pingting lifted her white neck proudly, “and the moon passes half the sky, then I shall drink it.”

Zuiju studied Pingting carefully, exhaling a deep breath.

She put the bowl of medicine on the table, knelt down and heavily thumped her head three times. She then went out the door, without saying another word.

The physician then stumbled into the side room, fell onto the pillows on a small bed and wept.

Chu Beijie was still wildly galloping in the darkness. The hills rolled past him, each one creating the illusion of the secluded residence that was still out of sight.

He didn’t dare imagine what it would be there when he arrived.

Had the plum bossoms opened?

Was there still the bright timbre of qin?

Was there smoke?

Three thousand and seven hundred soldiers galloped behind him. One thousand of his original elites were too exhausted and had returned to the capital, leaving two thousand with Chen Mu’s one thousand seven hundred soldiers.

Hundreds of horses.

The rumbling sound of the cavalry’s hooves could be heard beyond the mountains and rivers.
The reins had already been dyed red from Chu Beijie’s bleeding blisters.

He rode horses since childhood and bolted as fast as he could, employing every tactic he could. Shockingly there was someone who could ride even faster than him, who had ridden through the troop, reached his shoulders, faced the same cold wind asking, “Are you the Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie?”

Chu Beijie hadn’t answered, just grinded his teeth and surged forwards.

He knew that this fresh horse was already tired. Although it was still galloping, it had slowed down significantly.

He couldn’t deny it, it had slowed down. It made him anxious.

“Duke Chu, please stop for a while. I am from Bei Mo and have an urgent letter from Bei Mo’s General Ze Yin...”

“Go away!” Chu Beijie growled. He had to hurry, hurry, not a single minute could be wasted and not even the tiniest drop of energy could be wasted.

That person was annoyingly persistent too. Perhaps it was because he had been looking for Chu Beijie for a long time and refused to leave him. He desperately followed him, the cold wind filling his mouth as he yelled, “The General has an urgent letter to give to the Duke. Because General was worried that the letter would not arrive by the time Duke left the capital, he wrote two letters. One was secretly sent to the Royal Residence, the other to me. I was asked to wait along the roads to the outskirts.”

“Go away!” Chu Beijie glared at him, but rested his glare on his horse.

“Duke!” There was no way the man who dared to sneak into Dong Lin to deliver a letter to Chu Beijie would be afraid of death. He refused to give up, loudly yelling, “Please just read General Ze Yin’s letter about Bai Pingting...” but his words were interrupted as his figure shook. Chu Beijie had already changed onto his horse midflight and grabbed the reins. His voice was serious. “Lend me your horse.”

As expected of one of Ze Yin’s best men; his skill was not bad. Although he had been suddenly pushed back by Chu Beijie, he twisted and bounced upwards, successfully avoiding being thrown off.

With one hand holding the horse and the other extending into his pocket, he took out the carefully hidden handwritten letter of Ze Yin, quickly saying, “The one who murdered the princes was He Xia, not Bai Pingting. This letter is personally written by my General and can be used to prove Bai Pingting’s innocence.”

Chu Beijie’s expression remained unchanged as he took it over, without looking before flinging it randomly.

“Ah!” The messenger yelled, looking as the letter he had delivered with so many hardships disappear into the rumbling torrent of cavalry soldiers. He stared at him and said, “You...”

“It doesn’t matter whether she’s innocent or not.” Chu Beijie’s eyes were decisive and his tone was serious. “Even if her tactics aren’t wicked, she is still my Bai Pingting.”

He then pushed him, forcing the messenger to jump off and roll safely to the roadside.

Chu Beijie now had a new horse that galloped faster and pulled away from the troops behind.

He was crazy with longing, drenched with worry and hellish torment. All this would only stop until he embraced that thin frame.

Dear Pingting, Chu Beijie admits his mistake.

Clever Bai Pingting, stupid Bai Pingting, kind Bai Pingting, evil Bai Pingting were all the Bai Pingting that Chu Beijie loved.

Forever and ever.

The moon came out.

In all of Pingting’s memories, she had never seen such heartbreaking moonlight.

It gently shone on the world, casting the same pale light regardless of their pain or sadness, offering more depression.

“Let’s swear to the moon, never turn our backs on each other.”

Also under the moon, she had been delicate and charming, while he was gentle as water.

“Yes, from now on, you will be my Duchess and I will be your husband.”

“No.”

“I am only... a qin maid.”

“I like your qin.”

“I’m not good enough for Duke.”

“I’m good enough for you.”

“I’m not pretty enough.”

“I think you’re fine to look at.”

These words rang in her ears.

Do you remember, moon? On Mount Dianqing, Bai Pingting reached out, inch by inch, across the mountain of national hate, through the flames of war between the two countries’ armies and gratitude from fifteen years of upbringing.

She knew that she had crossed the flames, and she knew that she had spent fifteen of each season at the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

She knew that she had really stretched out her hand and crossed over the impossible mountain of national hate.

Was there really no place for feelings to hide in national pride?

Pingting shifted her gaze to look at the moon at the side of the sky.

The cruel moon had stealthily crept until it was nearly sitting on the branches of the forest trees.

Yet, there was still no movement from the east.

The sky slowly pressed down and the earth seemed to be as quiet as death, or simply everyone waiting breathlessly.

On the small table beside her, the black-coloured medicined had already cooled.

The bright moon was heartless, the shadows too. She raised her head and saw the moon refusing to pause its pace. Little by little, it reached the tops of the trees.

Numerous bloodstains had been left on her lips from her teeth and her palm was slowly darkening from her pinches.

A sour taste swelled in her eyes, gradually heating, but she refused to let a single teardrop fall. She feared that when she cried, her nightmare would come true.

She stood by the window, her back straight, as if her backbone were made by a sword. She could only stand strong for so long. It seemed that she would no longer be supported with just the slightest movement. If so, she would crumble and be swept away by the north wind, not leaving the slightest trace.

“From today on, you mustn’t neglect yourself, nor harm yourself.”

She could not forget Chu Beijie’s words and could not forget the warm feeling that swelled in her chest when she looked into his deep eyes.

Why fear a country’s hate if there was true love?

If it was a genuine, stubbornly persistent love with respect, no matter the hundreds or thousands of twists and turns, one should never change their mind.

After all, what was more important than looking at the person you love every day and night?

Time continued to quietly trickle by.

Dear moon, I beg you, don’t disappoint me.

Just this once, in my entire life, please don’t disappoint me!

Her slender fingers clutched onto the cloth at her chest.

Yet the moon had no ears. Perhaps it heard Pingting’s voice but harshly ignored it.

There remained no sound from the east.

Desperation slowly flooded and penetrated her once sparkling eyes.

The moon had passed half the sky.

Pingting looked at it, directly above the trees, glowing its relentless light.

At that moment, she forgot that it was the sixth, forgot about the surrounding soldiers, forgot about Zuiju, forgot about He Xia and forgot her vows.

She forgot everything.

Everything was as empty as a hole. Her limbs were attached, but they were no longer supported.

There was only the sound of her heart cracking, slow and harsh, piece by piece.

Like a crystal lotus, its petals began to be torn ruthlessly until not one was left.

Broken.

Broken into a myriad pieces.

“Miss...”

Pingting slowly turned to see Zuiju’s very mournful expression.

Her gaze fell on the bowl of black medicine on the table.

Zuiju looked out from misty eyes as Pingting walked over, who then picked up the bowl. The bowl seemed to weigh a ton. The bowl trembled in her hands, causing strong ripples at its surface, spilling onto the sides and onto the top of the table. The silence in the room made the atmosphere even more suffocating.

Her heart.

The gentless had gone.

The joy had gone.

Only despair and pain remained in her eyes, churning constantly. Her eyes were wide as if watching someone slowly taking out her heart and liver.

Zuiju knew that she would never forget Pingting's expression at that time.

Pingting brought the medicine to her lips and paused, as if she no longer had any energy left. The coldness touched her lips. She was reminded of the immense sense of loss she felt which made her shake, causing her hands to slip.

Crash!

The bowl broke into numerous pieces, and the black potion poured all over the floor.

The bitter tears she had forced back for so long finally rolled out like broken pearls from her trembling eyes.

Pingting fell to her knees, crumpling to a tight ball. Painful spasms ran through her body as her hands clutched tightly to her shoulders.

Her cries tore out of her soul, desolately honest, from her bloodied lips.

"Miss Bai..."

Zuiju sadly stroked her head but this seemed to shock Pingting even more. She suddenly looked up, her face full of tears. "Zuiju, don't force me. Please, please, don't force me like this!" she begged.

Zuiju felt like she was bitten by a snake and was reduced to touching Pingting's hand.

Was this the romantic, joyful Bai Pingting?

That person who could go several days without food or drink, leisurely read on the couch and asked her, "Can you smell the scent of snow?"? That Bai Pingting?

No.

That romantic, fairy-like person had been ruined.

Ruined by He Xia, ruined by the King of Dong Lin, ruined by Chu Beijie and ruined by Zuiju herself.

This bloody world could not tolerate the proud, dedicated Bai Pingting.

She was there before her eyes but in reality, faraway. Just a gentle touch would cause her to disperse like smoke without warning.

The medicine she personally brewed was now stained to the ground, looking like a spill of thick black blood. Zuiju looked at the crying Pingting, her distressed heart.

She never knew that she could be so cruel.

Moran's figure appeared at the door.

"He Xia has sent a carriage and is currently at the residence's entrance."

This was another heavy stone that pressed her scarred heart.

Pingting raised a hand, groping the wall to help her slowly stand up. She wiped her tears, her face deathly pale in the moonlight. She murmured, "I know."

Oaths must be abided.

Moran's face remained determined as he took out rope from behind his back. He tossed it to Zuiju whose face had yet to dry from the tears. He instructed, "Tie up Miss Bai." This incredible command was shockingly delivered in a very firm tone.

"Moran?"

"Miss Bai, it won't be because you didn't abide by the oath, but forced by my abduction instead." Moran's hands were firmly pressed on the sword by his waist. "I promised the Duke that as long as I exist, you must exist."

Chu Beijie had already pulled more than half a mile away from the rest of the soldiers.

He kept a close eye on the moon's movement, scratched it deep into his heart. The higher the moon rose, the heavier his heart sank towards a knife that sent his blood surging out, unstoppable, with every movement.

But the hands held the reins harder, tighter. Sweat stained his heavy armour and the cold wind did not pause in cutting his handsome face and bloodied mouth.

The moon had passed half the sky.

Had already passed half the sky.

He raised his head, looking at the mountains in the west in the distance. The snow he saw there befittingly froze at his heart and lungs.

Wait for me Pingting!

I'm willing to give up all of the blessings I've had in this life.

I beg you to wait for me this one time.

I beg for a little longer.

From now on, I will never leave your side.

From now on, even country and family affairs cannot separate us.

From now on, I promise that in Chu Beijie's eyes, the most important treasure is only Bai Pingting.

Pingting, Pingting!

I beg you to wait for me a little longer.

Chu Beijie was exhausted as he zoomed into the mountains, his horse riding as fast as it could over numerous branches and shady trees until his figure began to emerge.

Beyond the mountain forest, lay the secluded residence.

The gallops sent the snow flying at his sides as he rode.

After the gloomy forest, where only patches of moonlight were filtered through the trees to fall onto the snow, Chu Beijie could no longer smell its fragrance beyond it, just the smell of gunpowder.

I am back!

Pingting, please look up, so that I can see your figure.

I'll swap my whole life for the two hours of my lateness.

Chu Beijie's expression did not waver, his hand tightened around the sword at his waist as he encouraged the horse to move even quicker.

The horse shot out like an arrow from the dense forest.

The secluded residence finally appeared in his sight.

Fire filled the sky.

The smell of blood floated in the night sky, more chilling than the sight of actual blood.

His limbs stiffened and his heart stopped beating from that moment on.

The cruel coldness penetrated to his bones.

With one final surge of courage he rode into the residence. Piles of bones, some familiar figures, all of them were young guards.

People who had trained day and night with him, troublesome but good natured, and people not afraid of dying.

Their four limbs had been cut off and their blood had become cold.

They had no regrets on their faces and beside every guard, there were always a few corpses of the enemy soldiers.

Chu Beijie stepped on the blood-soaked ground. He had been to battlefields hundreds of times crueller than this, but had never known such a vivid colour of blood that chilled his heart like this.

Pingting, Pingting.

Where are you?

He quietly whispered in his heart, as fearing a loud voice would scare away the slightest trace of life.

In the corner of his eyes, he found Moran.

Moran had bleeding wounds everywhere and a sharp arrow had pierced firmly into his right shoulder, nailing him to the ground. An enemy soldier's corpse was pressed against his belly.

He was still breathing.

"Moran? Moran!" Chu Beijie knelt down, urgently calling him.

As if waiting for Chu Beijie's voice for a long time, Moran quickly opened his eyes, which he struggled to keep open. Until he realised that it was Chu Beijie's face, his sluggishness was replaced with obvious excitement. "Duke...you finally came back..."

"What happened? Where's Pingting?" His voice was solemn, "Where is Pingting?"

He stared at Moran, his sharp eyes were now trembling timidly. It seemed that just one word from Moran's quivering mouth was enough to cause the heavens and earth to crack.

"He Xia took her away." Moran breathed rapidly, twisting his face. He closed his eyes and summoned his remaining strength before opening them wide. He spat out, "Chase after them!"

Chu Beijie immediately stood up and rushed out of the entrance.

He was greeted by Chen Mu and their fastest subordinates who had just arrived, but his feet did not stop. In a deep voice he commanded, "Put out the fire. Leave the medic and two hundred people to treat the wounded! The rest, follow me!"

While he spoke, he got onto the horse.

The horse seemed to be aware of Chu Beijie's overpowering confidence. It neighed loudly, readied itself and stood dignified on the snow.

He Xia, Yun Chang's He Xia.

Chu Beijie's directed his piercing gaze towards the direction of Yun Chang.

Pingting was there.

She was on the road leading to Yun Chang. At least another day and a half would be needed until they left Dong Lin territory.

Wherever Pingting was, even if it were the end of the world, it wasn't far at all.

"Duke!" Chen Mu hurriedly ran out from the residence, reporting, "There are a few enemy soldiers who haven't died yet. I woke a ranking soldier. He said they came along the Hengduan Ranges to get here and will most likely be going back the same way. There are quite a lot of them, a full eight thousand."

Perhaps Chu Beijie was paranoid, but he could feel the familiar sense of crisis. Chu Beijie calmed the maid down and returned to his usual calmness on the battlefield, "He Xia has probably not guessed that I have already returned to the residence. It's likely that they arrived in small groups and will return the same way, meeting up back at Yun Chang."

The thundering sound of the horses approached as the rest of the troops who fell behind had finally caught up.

Chu Beijie didn't wait for them to dismount, before pointing his sword in the sky, loudly saying. "Men of Dong Lin, Yun Chang has stolen the Duchess of Zhen-Bei. Do you still have the strength to chase on?"

The Duchess of Zhen-Bei?

Who dares to steal the Duke of Zhen-Bei's beloved woman?

There was a brief moment of silence, when a thundering answer that could shake mountains broke out from the gathering. "Yes!"

"They have eight thousand men and we only have three thousand weary soldiers who have gone without several nights of sleep." Chu Beijie's gaze slowly swept across the crowd of young men of Dong Lin. His deep voice resounded in everyone's ears. "If we can't get her back, you may die a worthless death so you may choose to chase or stay."

"Chase!" The thunderous roar was without hesitation. The echo that bounced back was enough to send the branches on the snow jumping.

Chen Mu also offered a few words of encouragement. He mounted on his horse and rode to Chu Beijie's side. His voice was firm, "No one feels intimidated when following the Duke. Please make your command, Duke."

Chu Beijie lowered his voice. "Let out all of the pigeons you have, so that the Dong Lin troops at the border can be aware of the Yun Chang army in the Hengduan Ranges. As He Xia dared to venture so deeply into Dong Lin territory, it's likely that he has many more troops apart from the eight thousand with him prepared for ambush on Yun Chang's border. Warn them to be careful."

After these commands, Chu Beijie raised his sword against the north wind, directing it at the sky. "Let's chase!"

"Chase!" The three thousand or so polished swords came out of the scabbards, gleaming the cold light.

It seemed as if thunder was crashing.

The sound of hooves seemingly smashing apart the earth sounded once more.

The cold wind once again greeted Chu Beijie's wounds on his face, but his eyes were full of determination.

I'll go to the end of the world, as long as you are there, Pingting.

It's not far at all.

As long as you are there.

Chapter 37

It was warm and comfortable on Yun Chang's carriage.

The blood soaked secluded residence was no longer in sight.

Pingting sat in the corner, looking out at the moon with no feeling.

From today on, the moon she loved the most no longer had its flawless gentleness.

It refused to say a word, reflecting people's breaking hearts and providing the light for the battle cries and the guard's expressions who had died a wasted death. He Xia pushed open the heavy door and kindly loosened the ropes around her. He then left, taking the gilded box with him.

She had stood on those young men's undried blood to reach the entrance of the residence.

Her white silk shoes were now as red as the fiery sunset, leaving bright red shoe prints in the snow.

Her heart was slashed by knives.

The blood all over the ground was no else's. It was hers.

It poured out from her heart, dripping onto the icy snow which the cold did nothing to soothe.

The carriage had been waiting in front.

White curtains decorated the finely cut window frame. The carriage body had been wrapped with splendid fabrics.

Zuiju had rushed out from an unknown place. She had red patches on her sleeves and her fingers were covered in blood as she threw herself at the foot of Pingting, saying, "Miss! Miss! Allow me to take care of Miss on the way!"

He Xia's guards had already raised their shining swords, ready to attack.

Pingting turned around, looking at He Xia. "This is my maid."

He Xia looked at the begging Zuiju and softened his voice, "Get on."

Dear Zuiju, why bother?

Pingting leaned close to the window, listening to the sound of hooves. The sound of the wheel rapidly moved her inch by inch away from Chu Beijie's place.

She did not feel pain, did not feel like crying.

She had decided to forget the pain and the tears, so she could forever forget that person's voice and expressions.

She finally understood that true feelings were not actually that important.

National gratitude was a sea, and national hate was a mountain.

How could she be deeper than the sea or heavier than a mountain?

How could singing under the moon or playing qin amongst flower possibly compare to one's own country?

The purest love in this world was not invincible and was no match for fame and power, no match for the dedicated and no matched against false national pride.

"As a maid, don't you know that your Master is a famous general?"

“What famous general? He’s the one who decides what is more important and breaks other people’s hearts for his selfish needs.”

She thought about these words, and Bai Pingting smiled sadly.

Isn’t there a time where all people are a famous general?

When even if they can’t decide what is more important, they go ahead and break other people’s hearts for their own selfish needs?

His choice was right, properly selected.

As a famous general, he should have gone ahead and put an end to the broken heart, homeless and ruined soul he had created.

Until their promises, their smiles, were all forgotten.

A famous general.

As a famous general, he should have no regrets.

The wheels continued to turn rapidly, bumping along the road.

He Xia was eager to go home. He got Pingting and was riding towards home, not caring about the wind or frost that came at his way.

Was Yun Chang, the land hidden in clouds where his wife Princess Yaotian waited in that brilliantly decorated Royal Residence, his home?

If it wasn’t his home, then where could he go?

Where was the former Jing-An Ducal Residence?

Neither He Xia and Bai Pingting could ever return.

Never could return.

A sense of loss ran through him, seeping into his bones. He Xia turned back to look at the carriage rolling behind him.

Pingting had returned, upset and broken. It was as if her soul had been lost but a residual of memories of the Jing-An Ducal Residence remained.

She was there, and her former self would return.

If she was there, then the He Xia that joked about the four countries with sparkly eyes and honour would exist.

“Master!” Dongzhuo suddenly alerted, getting He Xia’s attention back. He rode from the troops from the front to He Xia. “Master, there are people blocking the road ahead. They say they would like to see Master.”

A sharp light flashed in He Xia’s eyes. He thought quietly for a while and held up a hand to stop the troops behind him.

The entire battalion stopped

“Bring them over.”

A man with his hands tied was soon pushed towards He Xia’s horse.

“You wanted to see me?” He Xia looked down at him, measuring the tall man.

He wore the clothing of a scholar and was very thin. His voice and gestures were very calm as he studied the two guards beside him before looking at He Xia. He showed no sign of fear as he raised his head, “My name is Fei Zhaoxing. I have not slept for several days and have been waiting for the Marquess of Jing-An to pass on an extremely precious message.”

He Xia stared at him quietly, not asking him what the news was. His expression darkened and he harrumphed. His voice was cold, “How did you know I, Prince Consort, would come here?”

The guards by his sides raised their swords, poised and ready to fly towards him whenever he commanded them.

Fei Zhaoxing was not surprised and laughed instead. He looked at them warily, “Which of the four countries doesn’t have their own spies? Honestly speaking to the Marquess of Jing-An, even my Master had not guessed that Marquess would come here at this time, so my being here is merely luck. Besides, if Marquess is on this road at this time, then my news will not be of any importance.”

He Xia’s piercing gaze that could decipher intentions rested on the man and saw that he wasn’t lying. He Xia’s tone slowed down as he asked, “Who is your Master? What news do you bring?”

“My Master is Gui Le’s...” Fei Zhaoxing took a step forward, lowering his voice, “Queen.”

The cavalry unit continued to surge to the west, led by Chu Beijie.

Both horses and men were exhausted, but not one fell behind.

The moon seemed a little shy and quietly hid somewhere no one could see, while the sun had yet to show its face.

It was nearly dawn, but the sky seemed darker than ever.

“Go!” Chu Beijie was still galloping against the wind.

His hands and feet were almost num. He could only feel the burning cold touch of his metal sword against his waist as well as an overpowering desire.

Fresh blood, bones and sand.

Worry and grief filled his chest. He was eager to wave the sword and feel the rush of adrenaline when he made his enemy fall and kneel before Pingting, begging for her forgiveness and smelling the soft fragrance of her skirt.

The tip of the mountain ranges were now in Chu Beijie’s sight. He rushed onto the summit, looking around at the unlit plains below. The winter sun began to rise slightly, causing everything to be coloured the same. The light flickered in his bloodshot eyes, causing it to look a little more energetic. He scanned his surroundings once more. A slight movement on the mountain ranges caught his eye.

Go!

In the darkness, the shadows were faintly flashing.

The breath left Chu Beijie.

His expression did not change as he drew his sword from its sheath. His pupils reflected his feverish desire to jump right in.

Chen Mu came forwards and followed Chu Beijie's gaze. He too, saw the flickering shadows. He had been a general for a long time and immediately understood the situation. He whispered, "It seems that they are small in number and are most likely troops He Xia left behind in case of ambush."

Now that Chu Beijie had seen traces of the enemy, his confident expression on the battlefield had returned. He whispered back, "If He Xia has left troops here, this means that the primary unit is indeed travelling the Hengduan Ranges."

When the primary unit safely passes through the Hengduan Ranges, the smaller units would immediately go catch up and meet up at a safe place.

"Rush towards them and leave a ranking soldier alive. Torture them until he says where the main unit has gone."

"Yes!"

The sword in his hand felt all too hot.

Yet his heart was even hotter than the sword.

Chu Beijie clenched the reins in one hand and stared at the familiar mountain ranges.

Pinging, are you inside these dense mountain ranges?

I beg you to return my gaze, just one moment.

This ancient land is silent for you.

These three thousand and seven hundred swords' cold reflections are flashing for you.

The most stupid and the most uncherishing Chu Beijie is coming for you.

As long as I see your smile, all of this man's warm blood will from thereon belong to only you.

The palm of his hand held the sword, drenched in cold sweat.

Chu Beijie turned his back against the mountain, slowly raised his sword as if piercing the bottomless darkness of the sky and spat, "Kill!"

"Kill! Kill! Kill!"

The piece of earth began to shake.

The cold light of the sword began to shake as the battle cries raged.

The thousands of men and horses stormed down the hillside, cutting the silence of dawn.

The men in the forest had expected to defeat all enemies and had carefully prepared sharp arrows and various boulders and pits for traps. They hadn't expected three thousand and seven hundred furious-looking men charging towards them with such monstrous rage.

They did not fear injury or death. Their attitude was the colour red. The only light colder than the reflections of swords was the one in the depths of their eyes.

“Ahhh!”

A painful scream and Chu Beijie's surroundings were filled with relentless fighting. Perhaps it was like a drawing, as the colour of blood splashed slightly like the colour of plums as horses randomly trampled in every direction.

Nobody could resist Chu Beijie. All of the enemies were quickly defeated.

As the two sides clashed, the three thousand and seven hundred crashed through from east to west, wiping the enemies clean. When Chu Beijie's horse had arrived on the furthest point of the enemy camp, the battle was over.

Yet the fury was not.

This was the most brainless kind of attack, but at the same time it was the most time-saving.

The metallic smell floated around in the forest, drifting about.

This was not war, this was a massacre. The enemy troop had less than a thousand men. Most of them had already been buried under the pile of bodies.

The battle cries had replaced the thunder of hooves. The following silence dominated the silence of death.

Beads of blood trickled from the sword.

Chu Mu brought the man Chu Beijie wanted alive. Although the enemy was wearing civilian clothes, his general attire and the way he held himself was different to ordinary soldiers. How could such a man possibly escape the eyes of a war veteran?

The enemy with several wounds was pushed heavily before Chu Beijie's horse.

“Where is He Xia's main party?” Chu Beijie's voice was pretty faint.

It was not his tone that was intimidating but his eyes.

The enemy soldier was surprised for a moment and raised his eyes to look at Chu Beijie. He saw that the man on the horse was compelling, but all he could see was a faint outline in the dim light. “Which general are you?” he asked suspiciously.

“Chu Beijie.”

“Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei?” The enemy general was very surprised as he exclaimed, “You're the Duke of Zhen-Bei?” His face was full of bewilderment.

A passing hint of worry crossed Chu Beijie's eyes as he lowered his voice, “Are you not one of He Xia's men?”

“Of course not.”

“Speak clearly!”

The enemy general decided to remain silent for a while. He thought a little, gritted his teeth as he submissively said, “I am in charge of defected troops and cannot complete my task anyway. I will be executed even if I return to my home country. Since it’s like that, I might as well propose a deal with the Duke of Zhen-Bei. I’ll tell Duke everything and can only beg you to spare my few remaining men alive.”

Not good...

Chu Beijie already knew that he was on the wrong track to finding the enemy. His heart was a mess, but his expression was even calmer. His voice was cold, “Speak.”

When the enemy general heard this, he immediately understand that his deal had been approved. He knew that he could take the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s word for it and he immediately replied, “I am the general of Gui Le’s Xiaoben Riding School, Zhao Wen. The King received a report saying that He Xia would be entering the Hengduan Ranges to abduct Bai Pingting. It was a rare chance, so the King ordered me to immediately hide and wait for them here so that we can ambush He Xia and bring Bai Pingting back.”

“The King of Gui Le, He Su?” Chu Beijie frowned, “How did he know that He Xia would be in the Hengduan Ranges?”

As expected, Zhao Wen had more to say. “According to the report, Yun Chang’s borders are closest to the Hengduan Ranges. They stationed a significant number of troops there, so how could one not possibly deduct that they are planning to return through the Hengduan Ranges?”

Chen Mu interrupted them, asking, “How many men do you have?”

“Nine hundred.”

Chen Mu’s expression was suspicious as he sneered, “With just nine hundred men, you dare to enter Dong Lin territory to pursue He Xia?”

“However, wouldn’t Dong Lin’s troops at the border detect us if we had too many men? My unit is Gui Le’s best at sneaking in, so we were able to slip into Dong Lin without detection. How on earth did we not meet with He Xia but the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s three thousand or so troops instead?”

Chen Mu could see that his words were honest and didn’t seem to be lying. He asked a question in return, “Do you know how many men He Xia has?”

“Don’t tell me it’s more than one thousand?”

“A whole eight thousand.”

Zhao Wen refused to believe him and shook his head. “Impossible, He Xia entered further into Dong Lin’s territory than us. If he really has a troop of eight thousand men, then the Dong Lin army would definitely have been aware of him.”

Chen Mu didn’t have a moment of rest or time to think since seeing Chu Beijie on his way to the capital. Hearing Zhaowen’s mentioning, he thought of his sudden transfer from the Dragon Tiger Barracks and felt his heart sink. He stole a look at Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie’s face was gloomy, his eyes both pained and sad.

The only remaining explanation was that the King of Dong Lin had plotted everything.

He had opened the entrance, letting the enemy abduct Bai Pingting – the woman Chu Beijie loved.

Chu Beijie refused to brood too much on this right now, as time was of the essence. He immediately asked the most important question, “As you have been waiting her for a long time, it seems that He Xia has still not gone this way, but we came from the direction where He Xia went. Where could He Xia and his men possible have gone, as this is the only path?”

Zhao Wen shook his head, “This is the only entry to the Hengduan Ranges and I can guarantee that He Xia did not come this way.”

Chen Mu sighed, “The only explanation left is that He Xia changed his route.”

Zhao Wen was upset by this. “If my King’s report is without error, then the welcoming troops should only be placed at the end of the Hengduan mountains. If He Xia has changed his route, then he had either detected danger here or already knew that we were planning to ambush him.”

“Having such knowledge is unusual. Like Gui Le, can’t Yun Chang have spies?”

Chu Beijie’s heart was as heavy as lead and considered why He Xia was so clever to change the route in advance. He unsheathed his sword silently, commanding, “Bury the dead and pack up, before resting three miles away from here. Let everyone have a good meal, and sleep well before setting out at noon.”

Chen Mu was surprised, “We’re not chasing any more?”

“And could we catch up?” Chu Beijie whispered a question instead, his heart sore. He secretly clenched harder on the reins, sending bursts of pain from his blisters. His voice was defeated, “We’re already on the wrong track so even if we head back, it’s already too late.”

Even if his horse could run a thousand miles an hour, by the time he caught up, He Xia would already be in Yun Chang territory.

When that time came, He Xia’s men would no longer be as simple as eight thousand.

Even if they were not yet in Yun Chang, it was three thousand against eight thousand. Unless one killed nine each, the chance of survival was very low.

Especially when they are in Yun Chang, the difference in their men was much greater —three thousand versus several tens of thousands. What were the chances of breaking into the innermost core where He Xia and the upper ranks were? Even if his soldiers had two lifetimes and took down as many as they could, there was no chance of seeing that beautiful face before falling to his death.

Yet if he did not put up a fight, that qin sound would be forever lonely as she stayed imprisoned in another’s place.

He wasn’t satisfied.

How could he be?

“Duke...what does Duke plan to do then?” Chen Mu freed Zhao Wen and his remaining soldiers as promised. He turned back, looking at the suppressed heartache and resentment on Chu Beijie’s face.

“I’m going to go to the border to build an army.” The wind of dawn had arrived and Chu Beijie’s gaze was directed at the faraway Yun Chang, the corners of his mouth lifting without the coldness of regret. “I am going to use every drop of Dong Lin’s military power to fragment Yun Chang’s territory until He Xia brings back Pingting with his own two hands.”

The woman whose fate was tied to his, the woman who used her qin to block his sword.

Pingting, with just a smile, you make my heart ache with your beauty.

I beg you to return my gaze, and just smile once.

Just one smile.

I will exchange the greatest bloodshed in history and the future, with the whole nation’s power, for your smile.

The winter was almost over, but the coldness did not leave.

There had been drastic changes to the four countries’ situation. After receiving the outskirts captured by the Dong Lin army, the King of Bei Mo immediately withdrawn his alliance with Yun Chang.

He Xia’s purpose had already been achieved. He safely withdrew his troop of over three hundred thousand soldiers without any further battles.

The peasants still thought that the Gods were still compassionate and did not know about the thrilling activities at the border that caused so many people to be heartbroken.

People had settled in. Although the situation had been rather unexpected, they calmed down nonetheless.

The Royal Residence of Dong Lin received the news of the enemy retreating and the restless crowd who were unable to eat or sleep were relieved at last. However, before a grand feast could begin, more unexpected news came in like a thunderbolt from the skies.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie, had already used his command flag and was currently commanding all of Dong Lin’s troops to pressure Yun Chang’s borders!

The laughter in the huge residence faded to silence as the officials looked at each other in bewilderment, not knowing what to say or think.

Yun Chang was not like Gui Le or Bei Mo. This country had the resources for war but had always kept out of it, leading to a much more matured army. They were led by the widely acclaimed General He Xia and so it seemed like certain death trying to attack Yun Chang. Not to mention, how could Dong Lin possibly have enough soldiers to stop just the plots of Gui Le and Bei Mo?

How could the Duke of Zhen-Bei, who had always been cautious, do such an unwise thing that was no different from suicide?

“Is that true?” The cup of wine in the King of Dong Lin’s hand did not move as he looked at the dusty-looking messenger kneeling on the ground of the hall.

The songs stopped as the singing and dancing maids detected the dangerous atmosphere in the hall. They trembled at the side, their heads bowed as they kneeled.

The messenger had been hurrying for several days and his voice was hoarse. He still managed to muster up a loud voice, "Reporting to King, the Duke of Zhen-Bei issued his commands six days ago. All of the generals at the borders, along with the generals in charge of the four barracks have been ordered to leave and meet up with the Duke of Zhen-Bei."

The King of Dong Lin said nothing and slowly turned to look at his pale-faced queen. He slowly settled the gold cup in his hands down, his gaze sweeping across the hall. "What do you think?"

When the Duke of Zhen-Bei had returned to the capital, the entire country celebrated, but several days later, he hurriedly left. Most of the officials did not know the details of Chu Beijie and Pingting's relationship, so they did not dare open their mouths and all were silent.

A suffocating silence filled the huge hall.

The old Senior Official, Chu Zairan happened to think of something else. He opened his mouth to offer, "As the Duke has mobilised every border's troops as well as the barracks, how many has he arranged to defend the Bei Mo and Gui Le borders?"

"He left a tenth of the original guarding troops at each border."

Just a tenth?

The officials cried out.

At that level, defence was virtually non-existent. If the other two countries suddenly launched an attack, they could head straight to the heart of Dong Lin.

All of the eyes rested on the King of Dong Lin.

The expression on the King of Dong Lin's face was very ugly, his eyes flashing several times. He held up the cup of wine to his lips and calmly took a sip. "I would like to calm down, please all leave."

The officials stood in panic as they fell into their lines. They then bowed.

"Your loyal subjects shall depart!"

The kneeling dance maids and musicians also withdrew quietly and carefully from the room.

The real silence only came when the officials had departed. The hall was messy with the aftermath of a celebration, and the crowd had quickly scattered in silence.

The army had gathered at the border to challenge He Xia.

For his country, he sacrificed his own brother and sacrificed Bai Pingting.

Now, Chu Beijie sacrifices his own brother and Dong Lin for Bai Pingting.

What was the cause?

What was the consequence?

The King of Dong Lin sat on the throne, looking around at the huge hall, silently taking another sip.

A white hand stretched towards him, gently pressing down on the golden cup.

“King...” The Queen was by his side, her voice low, “Please, can King quickly think of a way? Use an Order to recover the command flag from the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s hands.”

The King of Dong Lin turned to her, looking at her in the eye. His smile was bitter, “Could Brother shift all of the troops without something like a command flag?”

The elite soldiers of Dong Lin hadn’t hesitated to attack the capital and besieged the Royal Residence, under his command that year.

There were some people who were born with the ability to command and give courage to everyone.

“Even so, we musn’t sit and turn a blind eye, King.” The Queen’s heart hammered painfully in her chest, “For just a Bai Pingting, he has put the entire nation’s security at risk. What difference is the Duke of Zhen-Bei to a madman? What can he achieve by only caring about his own emotions and betraying the Royal House?”

The King of Dong Lin’s deep gaze pierced beyond the door of the hallway, to somewhere faraway. “He has already done that.”

He no longer cared about his life or death, about the Royal House, about his country.

For the first time, the sense of responsibility he had since birth had been replaced with vanity, without any hope for change.

For just a woman.

Just a Bai Pingting.

“Beijie, Beijie, are you still the Brother that would sacrifice everything for Dong Lin?” The King of Dong Lin slowly stood up, looking up at the sky, trying to seek its depths. Suddenly he felt a throb of pain at his throat he splurged out fresh blood onto the table, with a “gah”.

“King!” The Queen yelled, her voice anxious. “Someone! Come!”

Servants immediately hurried over and were shocked to pieces by the scene they saw.

“King!”

“Careful, King!”

“Physician, call a physician!”

A gentle rain began to shower over the region.

From the ancient Royal Residence, bursts of sorrow and panic came.

The area before the throne had been dyed with blood –bright red like the endless bloodshed of the guards in the secluded residence, no different to the liquid that dripped from the swords on a battlefield.

A country was a home and a home was made of people. The resentment lingered as thick as mountains.

Rai Pinoting what is not impossible for you?

Chapter 38

Yun Chang.

He Xia was standing before the table, calmly rolling out the latest report from the army. He turned to see his wife.

“Don’t worry, Princess. The Dong Lin army has been subjected to a long period of war and have depleted forces. Yun Chang is completely fresh and has been prepared for a long time.” He Xia’s voice was relaxed. He smiled faintly.

Princess Yaotian gracefully sat down onto the table, studying her husband who just returned from a long absence. His face was as handsome as the first time she’d met him. His calm tolerance remained the same except for a little more invisible satisfaction in his expressions.

“Are we really going to war? During the alliance with Bei Mo’s forces, Prince Consort said that it was just a way to force the enemy to stop so they would realise my Yung Chang’s superiority without having direct clash with the enemy army.”

He Xia carefully studied the expression on Yaotian’s face. He softened his voice, “Is Princess afraid?”

Yaotian sighed faintly, “Chu Beijie is a famous general and Dong Lin’s army is at work. How could I not be afraid seeing so many Dong Lin troops camped at our border for so many days? Not to mention, even if Bei Mo is an ally to Yun Chang, what if they do not keep their promise and attack us while we are held up at Dong Lin’s border?”

“He Xia apologises for worrying Princess.” He Xia stepped forward and lovingly touched his wife’s face. His voice was attractive like a magnet as he whispered, “Please place all of Princess’ fears and worries to He Xia. He Xia promises not to let Princess feel even the slightest concern.”

The pendants of her heavy coronet worn at her forehead blocked a portion of the light in Yaotian’s eyes. She straightened her neck and studied the depths of He Xia’s eyes. The light shimmered in her own as she sweetly smiled, “With Prince Consort here, how could I worry?” She lowered her head but was stopped by He Xia’s fingertips resting on her chin.

She couldn’t help but involuntarily raise her head bit by bit alongside those fingertips. A warmth met her lips and the heat swelled. In one warm breath, he entered her lips and between her teeth.

The soft kiss gradually increased.

Yaotian was dizzy with the kiss, her blush spreading past her ears. She finally managed to wriggle away from He Xia, her heart anxious to jump out of her chest. She raised a hand and tidied the loosened strands, looking at a distant mirror where she saw that her ears had reddened. She gave He Xia a look of mock resentment and anger, murmuring, “Seriously, Prince Consort. This is the Royal Residence, not the Prince Consort Residence. If the maids saw this, how could I face them?”

He Xia heartily laughed, “Spare me, Princess. He Xia left Yun Chang too long and has dearly missed Princess so he became a little uncontrollable there.” He lowered his voice, “Would you like to come tonight to the Prince Consort Residence? The Dong Lin army is currently assembling so I will have to leave for the border in a few days to deal with Chu Beijie. I don’t know how long this battle will take and I have no idea when I’ll be able to come back to see Princess ”

Yaotian's ears were still steaming from his warm breath, and her heart was thumping crazily. She lowered her voice, "Isn't Prince Consort tired? You only returned late last night to the capital and entered the Royal Residence early morning next day. You certainly did not have a good sleep."

Their private room's air suddenly seemed heavy when they heard the slight sound of footsteps from the other side of the curtain.

A silhouette appeared and stopped behind the curtain. Luyi respectfully said, "Report to Princess, the Senior Official would like to see you."

"Welcome him in." Yaotian instructed. She turned to look at He Xia, her smile like honey. A frown was spread on her well-groomed eyebrows. "It's all Prince Consort's fault for making my face so red. What will the Senior Official think now when he sees me?"

"Just let him see you. How could a wise man such as the Senior Official not understand the relationship between a husband and wife?" He Xia gently laughed and went over to her. He whispered, "Princess hasn't replied to Prince Consort whether she will come to the Prince Consort Residence."

"Seriously, you..."

"The pain of longing."

No matter how handsome the man, once they are free, they were monkeys women couldn't deal with.

Yaotian was both angry and amused. She sucked her lip, "Since Prince Consort has returned, then I shall visit Prince Consort's residence with excitement. But what would the officials think of my going since Yaotian is a girl? It seems...that I'd better find two beautiful, personal maids for Prince Consort." She glanced slyly at He Xia.

He Xia's expression did not change as he continued to smile while asking, "Then tonight, shall I prepare alcohol and desserts in the rear courtyard of the Prince Consort Residence?"

Yaotian hid her smile and returned his gaze. She stretched out her white hands, nudging his shoulder softly. "The generals are still waiting to report to Prince Consort. Go see them. Be careful not to bump into the Senior Official or she'll whine on and on to Prince Consort."

He Xia good-naturedly softly pinched her on the cheeks before taking a step back. He adopted a joking expression before he left, half-singing as he posed a bow, "Wish you the best, Princess."

The curtain lifted loudly. Gui Changqing happened to walk in and saw him as he turned onto the porch.

"Prince Consort."

"Senior Official."

They respectfully nodded to each other as the two passed each other. Gui Changqing turned and watched He Xia's back view, full of confidence and strength. He stayed silent before entering through the bead curtains through the innermost section, greeting Yaotian.

"No need for excessive politeness. Please have a seat, Senior Official."

Luyi served up the tea specially prepared for Gui Changqing. Gui Changqing took it and drank a mouthful before raising to look at Yaotian's face that could not conceal the sweet joy she felt. He opened her mouth and laughed. "No

wonder all the officials say that one can easily deduct whether the Prince Consort is in the capital from the Princess' expression."

Gui Changqing had been serving for many years and had watched over Yaotian as she grew up. He was like a father to her. Her laugh made her feel indignant, "Even Senior Official is making a joke out of Yaotian?"

Gui Changqing adoringly looked into her eyes and restrained his laughter. He changed it for a serious tone as his voice serious, "Has Princess told Prince Consort yet?"

At this question, the smile suddenly disappeared from Yaotian's face.

"Yes." She slowly sighed, frowning, "He isn't worried about the massive gathering of Dong Lin soldiers at all and has no intention of giving up Bai Pingting to stop the war."

"Princess, if we really do clash with Dong Lin, the opposition will be led by Chu Beijie. Our army will be led by our Prince Consort, resulting in great loss to both sides. There is not the slightest benefit for my Yun Chang."

"What can I do?" Yaotian frowned, "When talking about Dong Lin's army, the Prince Consort didn't even mention Bai Pingting's name, suggesting that he clearly does not plan to settle things peacefully with Chu Beijie."

Gui Changqing didn't say anything. He moved the lid off the teacup and studied the ripples inside. He let Yaotian to rest her gaze on him for a long time before placing the teacup back onto the table with both hands. "Princess fell into Prince Consort's trap. Sending out the main army and adventurously approaching the Dong Lin border was to simply sever Chu Beijie's ties to the Royal House and therefore break them from using Bai Pingting." He paused and looked at Yaotian.

"Please continue, Senior Official," Yaotian replied.

"Judging from Chu Beijie's lack of grasp on the overall situation and his sudden preparations to attack Yun Chang, it is highly likely that he is no longer working alongside the King of Dong Lin, meaning our goals have been reached. Bai Pingting's value has been lost too. It will do more harm than good for Prince Consort to continue to hold onto Bai Pingting."

"Ss..."

"Princess must not only be careful with the future but also the present." Gui Changqing looked squarely in Yaotian's eyes, lowering his voice, "The Prince Consort has currently arranged Pingting to live at his residence. I heard that in addition to instructing his servants not to let her leave, they were also told to treat her with the etiquette deserving of a mistress."

The pendants on Yaotian's coronet shook slightly. She avoided Gui Changqing's gaze, pondering in silence.

Some time passed before Yaotian faintly replied, "Understood."

As Gui Changqing left, Luyi came in to report, "Lunch has been prepared."

"I'm not hungry; tell them to take it away."

She dismissed Luyi and other maids in the room. She sat in the room alone, head bowed while deeply thinking in silence. Multicoloured lights scattered from the jewel curtains. They swayed with the wind, occasionally knocking into each other and resulting in a clear sound.

Yaotian raised a hand and took off the coronet on her head. She held it in her hand and studied it briefly before putting it on the table. She removed the few remaining ornaments from her hair, letting her jet black hair spill down, covering her shoulders. She looked into the mirror. It seemed that her face had become a little sharper, emphasising her beauty.

She lifted the corners of her mouth to the mirror, testing out various smiles, each pretty in its own way. Yaotian laughed and placed the mirror on the table. “Luyi!” she called.

Luyi hurried from the porch. “I am here, what would Princess like?”

“I want a bath.”

“Yes, I will send orders to get it ready.”

A hint of relaxation was in Yaotian’s voice from behind the curtain. “Sprinkle some fresh petals of the qixiang flowers from the snowy mountains.”

“Yes.”

As Luyi replied, Yaotian seemed to have another thought, thinking, “What is the name of the rouge that Histographer Houcheng presented me on my birthday last month?”

“Answering Princess, it is known as Fangniang, and is made from the petals of a very rare flower. The powder is very thin and evenly applies onto the face. The official that brought it up said that it could make your skin as soft as a new born child.”

Yaotian listened carefully, and replied “Hm”. She then instructed, “After the bath, bring the Fangniang so that I may try it.”

“Yes, Princess.”

These commands were enough. Luyi went to prepare everything as wanted. Yaotian got up out of her seat, looking down at the long, bright, red-purple dress of a princess.

This was a dress specially tailored for her by Yun Chang’s best tailor. There were several flowers and birds on it that kept dozens of the Royal Residence’s seamstresses busy with embroidery for a whole month. The sleeves were very long. Silver-purple tassels hung at the edge from her feet, completing the look. It could not be more expensive or intricate than it was.

Excitement and pride flashed in Yaotian’s inky black eyes.

The two most famous generals in the world, the Marquess of Jing-An and the Duke of Zhen-Bei, would now compete.

She herself was the Princess of Yun Chang and was already He Xia’s wife.

Yet how did the Bai Pingting capture Chu Beijie’s heart?

Zuiju was the one who knew best what Bai Pingting looked like at the moment.

The two had come empty-handed and only had two changes of clothes. The way here had been bumpy. They were both tired and dirty. When they arrived at the Prince Consort Residence, everything seemed to have been prepared a long time ago. No instructions were needed to call everyday items since they were all within reach.”

Pingting's bronze mirror laid at the table alongside the comb she used back at the Ducal Residence. She had a large closet of neatly folded clothes, all the colours that Pingting liked —not a single error.

There were a few cases near the table. One had a guqin in it and another had an agate bowl full of small multicoloured pebbles that one could easily mistake for jewels.

The house was soaked with incense, carrying warmth, but was not stuffy.

A vase stood on the windowsill, filled with freshly cut white plum blossoms. A few unopened buds had been placed next to the blooming flowers.

It was so perfect that it was chilling.

It felt as if Pingting had lived there for a long time. It was even more chilling seeing Pingting appear to want to be there, wanting to live there forever.

He Xia had headed to the Royal Residence early in the morning, leaving behind two caged birds that were familiar with the new environment.

Pingting was in the back of the building. Her face no longer had the extreme distraught expression she had when the moon passed half the sky, ending the sixth.

The expression that replaced was one of lazy leisure.

This strange leisure made Zuiju feel unable to be close to her.

Zuiju stood across the corridor, looking at her straight back. She knew that her insides had already snapped, yet couldn't understand why she was able to stand so straight like that.

She sighed softly.

She couldn't understand it, but apart from Bai Pingting herself, who else could?

Zuiju sighed a few more times. She wasn't that far away from her. She could see her face clearly but couldn't see her heart.

Across the corridor, Zuiju's sighs seemed to bring another onset of unstoppable tears. She cautiously raised her hands and wiped the corners of her eyes. Pingting turned to her, beckoning anxiously.

Zuiju was stunned by this.

Ever since Pingting had spilled the medicine, fell to the ground and cried, she had become something soulless, a puppet or simply something inscrutable. She wouldn't say a word, and there was no distance in her eyes. Zuiju hurried forwards, as she hadn't seen such an energetic action from Pingting for such a long time.

Even though it was just a gesture, it was enough to bring joy.

Zuiju quickly walked through the corridor, hurrying to Pingting's side. "Miss Bai, what's wrong? Do you have any orders? Do you want to eat something?"

Pingting shook her head. She looked around to see if there were any outsiders watching before whispering, "It's kicking me."

The tiniest, almost-invisible gentle smile escaped from her pale face.

After several days of desolate grief and despair, this smile was the most beautiful Zuiju had ever seen in her life.

“Movement already?” Zuiju frowned and said, “You must have mistaken it, Miss. It’s not that old and it shouldn’t be able to kick at its current age.”

“There’s no mistake.” Pingting bit her lip, “It really is moving.” The slightest movement at that instant reminded Zuiju of the beauty that had impudently messed around in Chu Beijie’s arms.

An unexpected memory.

The first memory without sorrow that had come to mind after that desperate night.

The scent of plum blossoms had been scattered throughout the secluded residence after the burial of the Locked Away Goodies. Hongqian had ran off to somewhere unknown like usual while the guards stood, occasionally nodding and chatting. Moran’s expression was distant as usual, but he was a good-hearted, caring and gentle man.

The matrons in the kitchen sent meals over every day, affectionately offering a few complaints. They’d take away the food containers with satisfaction when seeing that Miss Bai had enjoyed the day’s meal.

Chu Beijie’s figure was also there, and Bai Pingting’s heart was there too. She would play qin and he’d quietly stand at one side. Raising his head, his eyes had a look of pleasure and love that would not separate them.

All set against the snowy backdrop, it was picturesquely beautiful.

Looking back now, Zuiju realised that that period of living in the secluded residence was something truly precious.

Slender fingers waved in front of Zuiju’s eyes, and she came back to earth. “Ah...Miss...” she said.

“I can’t stay here.” Pingting’s voice was soft, full of determination.

He Xia must not know about this child.

But the two were currently imprisoned. How could He Xia not realise that Pingting’s stomach had been growing day by day?

“Miss, the Duke will definitely come save us quickly.”

Zuiju regretted it the moment the words left her lips.

Pingting’s expression was like someone thumping down heavily on a river, stiffly frozen by winter, causing it to completely shatter.

She turned away and sat down on a stone bench of the courtyard. She lowered her head, not letting Zuiju see her expression. It was a while before she slowly said, “Zuiju, I beg you...”

Zuiju self-criticised herself for her loose tongue and hurriedly murmured, “Zuiju was wrong, I won’t mention that person in front of Miss again.”

Pingting then looked up at Zuiju and it was several moments later when she slowly raised her hands to her.

Zuiju took them and knelt, raising her head. “Say no more, Miss. Zuiju understands.”

The two slender white wrists grasped each other, gripping tighter and tighter.

The snow whirled; the flakes fell like tears.

The guqin of the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence had been damaged. The large palm that stroked her black hair no longer had its warmth.

One remained as the world's precious sword that seemingly destroys, while the other became the red soul that swirls around the cold moon.

After the moon passed half the sky, her soul had been torn out of her bones and reduced to ash.

"One day, you will know what an excruciating heartache is."

She already knew.

She knew from that moment.

The pain was not without reward as at least she had a little life in her belly. There was still one, in this thin body and broken heart.

Its heart may be small, perhaps not yet formed, but when it began to jump vigorously, it was something no one could stop.

"No matter what, prioritise protecting the child first." Zuiju softened her voice, "Miss was subject to such a bumpy ride, through great anxiety and sadness. Now you must open up your heart and sleep well. I'll get them to stew some rich medicine."

"Absolutely not." Pingting objected, "He Xia is proficient in medical knowledge too. He'll immediately understand from whatever you prepare. The most important thing right now is to quickly leave."

Zuiju's eyes brightened, "Has Miss already thought up of a plan?"

Pingting's eyebrows fell to a frown. She shook her head lightly. "He Xia is not a normal person. It won't be easy if we attempt to leave from his supervision..."

"Then..."

"We have to think of a plan." Pingting's eyebrows turned away, suddenly resting on the stone table underneath her hand.

On the side of the stone table, there were small words carved onto it – "Prince Consort Residence".

The Prince Consort Residence of Yun Chang's Prince Consort.

He Xia's military influence in Yun Chang was all thanks to the two words of his title, Prince Consort.

Pingting carefully looked at the inscription. She released her tight frown. She sighed and mumbled to herself, "I wonder what kind of person the Princess of Yun Chang is like..."

From the rumours, the Princess of Yun Chang's name was "Yaotian".

As heavenly, dignified and beautiful as the spring flowers.

When she was still young, while studying with her Master, they had occasionally gone outside the residence to try new things.

They often went to Prince He Su's Residence.

There they had often encounter the brothers of the Royal House laughing and chattering. Occasionally they would gossip about the affairs of Yun Chang's Royal House and the general consensus were the same – they were pitiful.

Rumours had it that Yun Chang's Royal Residence had the least number of beautiful residents in the Royal Residences of the four countries. Even the King and Queen were unable to be publicly affectionate. The only place in the entire Royal Residence where they could be together, was the Queen's private quarters.

But when they were out of the little nest, no matter how intimate they were, they had to part ways and sit in their own respective sides.

"Pitiful, just pitiful. No wonder the King of Yun Chang only has a daughter."

"With those conditions, they're fortunate to even have a child."

These noble's children only understood a little of the society of adults but said the words loudly, tutting and sighing as they thought of their own, well-developed, open Gui Le. As long as the water filled their own cans, they were able to boldly shout out their feelings without a care for the rest of the world.

"The Princess sure has an unlucky life. In our Gui Le, when the Princess married, she could live in the Prince Consort Residence. The married couple are together everyday and can do whatever they want. Yun Chang is very different though. Even when the Princess marries, she remains in the Royal Residence, and only when she wants to watch the snow, flowers or moon, can she contact the Prince Consort and talk the night through."

"Ha! Wouldn't everyone know how many times she goes per month? Just count the number of times the Princess' carriage comes."

Pingting had stood by her Master, listening to their reckless remarks, embarrassed early on. She would then tug at Yangfeng, find a lush green willow tree in the courtyard by herself, choose a rock to sit in, and chat about girly things.

The past could not be recovered. Looking back now, everyone had changed.

Pingting was helpless, she had to look forwards. The Master who had chuckled softly about the pitiful Yun Chang Royal House was now the owner of Yun Chang's Prince Consort Residence. How were their relationship? One was a Prince Consort from Gui Le and the other was Princess Yaotian who had stayed so deep inside her Royal Residence.

It seemed the time He Xia lead the troops to the border and into Dong Lin, surround the secluded residence and return from the battlefield with the loots of victory was worth several days of separation to the Princess.

Even if it was a short separation for a wife and husband, they were still newlyweds.

Did they miss each other?

If it was that person, he'd come back after a day. With a strength never seen before, he would force his way and cause several nights of chaos, forcing kiss after kiss despite her begging.

That person...

A pain jolted her heart, a barbed arrow that had already been embedded suddenly raging after being forgotten for so long. Pingting suddenly came back to her senses and used her fingers to pinch at her tender skin.

Don't think about it.

You musn't think about it.

Never think about it again!

She breathed in deeply, forcing the thoughts back to the three words, "Prince Consort Residence."

He Xia hadn't been in control of the military power for a long time and had yet to secure his status. He was definitely still trying to make his wife happy the best he could. The Marquess of Jing-An who had lost his home and place in Gui Le's government had suffered enough. He undoubtedly understood the significance of the Princess' support.

He Xia would use all of the tactics he could to capture the Princess.

Where else but the first night upon returning to the capital be spent?

Pingting was silent for a long time before turning to Zuiju. "Did He Xia enter to Royal Residence this morning to see the Princess?"

"After his bath, he carefully dressed before leaving. He probably went to see the Princess." Zuiju thought for a little. "Of course he had to hurry to see her. No matter what, the Princess is the master of Yun Chang."

She then saw the deep pondering expression on Pingting's face whose eyes revealed a hatching plan. She then frowned as if some point was bothering her. Zuiju tentatively asked, "Has Miss thought of a plan? Is it something to do with the Princess?"

Indeed, it seemed that Pingting had encountered a problem through her thinking. She slowly shook her head and stared at Zuiju, thinking deeply again. She then said, "Do you have any prescription that can temporarily change my pulse so that He Xia wouldn't know the truth when he checks? Just one night is enough." She knew medicine well herself and knew such a task was difficult to achieve.

What herb could be effective but not harm the child in her belly? Since they were in captivity, whatever Zuiju wanted had to be approved by the Prince Consort Residence, meaning that He Xia would not suspect it.

Zuiju replied, "Is Miss testing my medical knowledge? Even my Teacher would not know, not just I."

Pingting didn't have much hope in that either. Her face remained sad. In a low voice she said, "This is the most important step. If we don't think things through, then we will not be able to escape so easily."

The corner of Zuiju's lips suddenly lifted into a sly smile. "Although there is no such prescription, it's not like I don't have other methods. Give me seven silver needles. I promise, by tonight, He Xia won't detect Miss' fetal pulse."

"Acupuncture?" Happiness danced into Pingting's eyes.

Huo Yunan, Dong Lin's genius doctor, specialised in acupuncture.

“However, it can be only done once. If done too many times, it will not be good for your fetus.” Zuiju’s words were frank, “Also, after the acupuncture is done, your pulse would not be as calm and regular as usual but slightly disordered.”

“That’s even better!” Pingting quietly clapped a hand onto the stone table, the white and black of her eyes contained about thirty percent of its original light. She lowered her voice, “I need He Xia to think I’m sick.”

“But the silver needles...”

“The silver needles are the easy part. He Xia has commanded the people of the Prince Consort Residence to treat me like a mistress.” Pingting’s eyes slowly turned and rested on the two probing maids standing across the pond. “If I tell them to get some, would they dare not to?”

Chapter 39

The snow had just stopped when He Xia returned to the Prince Consort Residence.

He had just arrived late last night yet had to leave early next day to see the Princess in the Royal Residence. He then had to meet with the generals to discuss plans about Dong Lin. His iron-like body couldn’t help being a little tired.

His eyes rested on the Prince Consort Residence before him, majestically magnificent but a little lacking in activity. Since coming back from the Royal Residence, he felt a little more attached to it but at the same time, unwillingness and fear.

This attachment and fear was all because of one person.

Pingting was there. His eyes often flickered to the colours Pingting liked and wore. He zoned in on frequencies that resembled Pingting’s breathing.

She always unwittingly affected others with just one breath, capturing their heart. She herself would remain lazily and leisurely, utterly oblivious to herself and others.

But He Xia was the exception.

Thanks to their deep bond of fifteen years, He Xia was able to affect Pingting with his breath, capturing Pingting’s heart. Pingting would notice whenever his expression wasn’t right, his body feeling uncomfortable or his emotions a mess. Those two clever eyes would softly roll around twice and would have already deducted what was wrong. She’d then carefully plan out something to help him, whether it be strolling around the gardens, playing the qin or cracking a joke.

Occasionally if he was still unhappy after persuasion, he would pick up his sword and begin a sword dance. Pingting would then specifically change into a dress with extra large sleeves to accompany in the slow and gentle “Nine Days” dance.

As the two connected, the misery became a blooming flower.

Not many men under the skies were blessed to have such a time.

This blessing belonged to He Xia once

It was only when Pingting's eyes had moved on from He Xia. He was shocked to find that Pingting's gaze was a valuable treasure.

It was not the qin sound or the singing, not the touching dance, not the charming laugh. It was her fine assurance that was most precious.

The skies had decided that the blessing he had been given was to be removed one day.

How could he obediently hand the blessings he once had to Chu Beijie without a fight? That Duke was an enemy country, the one that had set plans with fake retreats, the Duke of Zhen-Bei who provoked He Su to drive out the House of Jing-An, the man who left the Precious Parting Soul Sword behind and the man who stole Pingting.

The footsteps he took up the steps were somewhat slow.

The threshold at the door was very tall. It was the threshold to his Prince Consort Residence, yet it seemed that if it were any taller, it would block the door and become a sturdy prison.

He willingly came in, but that didn't mean he was willing to stay inside forever.

He Xia lowered his head and looked at the indentations his sword had left on his palm. His hand were full of strength and flexibility. He knew how to cleverly pick, cut and puncture his way to victory.

The four countries were now in chaos.

Chaos was a hero's playground.

He was born a general and born into the House of Jing-An, giving him a superior identity to observe the situation of everything. He was a born genius, one who should sit at the top, above all.

But another person had come into the picture — Chu Beijie, also of noble blood. He too was talented with words and strength, another savior of his country who was also able to carefully lead his troops with warrior-like strength.

He Xia and he were just like Gui Le's two famous qin players, Yangfeng and Pingting. Their names were linked together for their whole lifetimes.

Yangfeng and Pingting were friends from childhood.

Yet those two were destined enemies.

Pingting had returned, and Chu Beijie could not have her. Just like Pingting, Chu Beijie would never get his way forever.

A flash of colour suddenly appeared before He Xia's eyes. He lifted up his foot and strode through the door of the Prince Consort Residence.

He hurriedly entered through the atrium and turned the corridor towards the pond, when he stopped before a stone wall. He Xia turned and looked at the figure in the pavilion across him.

There was a table in the pavilion. The guqin had been set up on it and the incense beside it had been lit. Pingting was seated in front of the guqin, silently stroking the head of the qin. It seemed as if she was trying to wipe off traces of contaminating sweat until it was all carefully erased.

Seeing this, He Xia deeply remembered that it had been a long time since he last heard Pingting play qin.

He had always been the one seated the closest, watching beside her. Her indescribably beautiful hands lightly struck chords onto the ancient qin, trembling slightly. The qin would then spit out a wonderful sound, sometimes like an arrow that stopped the wind as it shot straight towards the sky.

Even the clouds couldn't help parting.

It had been so long since he last heard Pingting's qin sound.

He didn't dare alarm Pingting and quietly leaned on the wall of the stone shelter, anticipating the familiar qin sound to begin. The sound that appeased his weary heart, pointing out the direction of home.

Pingting didn't seem to be ready to play qin. She just had her head lowered as her fingertips repeatedly stroking the guqin. Perhaps she had a dim light of thought, perhaps not, but her fingertips stopped briefly on the thin string.

The incense elegantly burned on, its dark red light flickering. Gradually, it dimmed, flickered a few more times stressfully and went out.

"Why are you not playing?" He Xia walked out from the stone shelter, stepping on the few bricks placed on the snow until he stopped before the pavilion.

Pingting seemed to not hear him, just continued to stare at the qin.

"This is a qin I specifically sent someone to buy from Gui Le. Do you like it?"

No matter how kind his words were, there was no reply.

Since getting on the carriage, Pingting had never spoke another word to him.

Her person had returned, but her heart had been left forgotten at Dong Lin.

After a while, He Xia sighed. "Order whatever you want from the kitchen. There are two Gui Le chefs in this residence and are particularly good at making garlic pork and pickles." He had planned to return to his room after saying this. After taking several steps away, he turned back, "I haven't heard your qin sound for a long time." His voice was soft as he turned back, ready to leave once more.

"Me too...haven't seen Master sword dancing in the snow for a long time."

A very faint, almost inaudible whisper came from behind.

He Xia turned around in surprise, his eyes flashing with joy as said, "Do you want to see it?"

Pingting avoided his eyes, faintly sighing. "Isn't Master tired? You came back late last night and left early next morning."

He Xia stared at her, touched. His lips revealed a doting smile, "How could I be tired with you watching me?"

His sword gently came out of his scabbard like a dragon entering water, smoothly gliding in and shedding its dirty half which floated on the water like a quilt.

It seemed that the blade could cut the clouds till they spilled water or quickly beckon the lightning towards them.

Pingting remained seated at the pavilion, silently watching.

Her eyes were like watery smoke. When He Xia gazed into them, all of his tiredness corroded and melted away.

He Xia's sword leapt freely into the sky. Its spinning was closely followed by Pingting's eyes.

In that moment, it seemed that the cozy Jing-An Ducal Residence had been brought back.

Nothing had changed.

His father and mother, his home and his determination to protect all of them were there.

The days had not passed; the seasons had not changed, and death was non-existent.

He Xia's sword swung, easily waving back the heavy imprints of his past.

The freezing north wind was unable to stop He Xia's pride after finishing the dance. He was soaked in sweat as he used his sleeves to rub his forehead. He laughed, "Again!" The sword began to float up again, suddenly stopping. Its style appeared to change. It was a dragon, ready to take off to the skies. It had been Pingting's favourite Jing-An sword technique back then.

Ping!

As the dragon of the sword walked in the four directions, an unexpected qin sound began to ring, momentarily jolting the sword.

He Xia was delighted by this. His actions continued without pause. He turned, the sword's direction changing once more. The qin sound became louder like the call of a dragon but higher pitched.

The sword danced to the qin with the greatest accuracy, flawless.

After the entire set of Jing-An sword techniques had been danced, Pingting entered with the finale, "Nine Days."

At the final cut of the sword, the qin sound stopped too.

Two pairs of deep eyes clashed in midair as the complex yet familiar feeling came crashing back.

Dear Pingting, you're the same as me, unable to forget the past.

Your heart still has the Jing-An Ducal Residence, still has the Marquess of Jing-An!

Apart from Chu Beijie, there is no one else who can shelter your heart, right?

You're still the same!

On the white world, silence suddenly fell.

No one knew how long before the gazes in the air separated. Pingting's pupils shifted until they rested on the ground beyond He Xia.

He Xia seemed to notice and turned back.

An elegant figure jumped into his eyes

Yaotian was dressed in a gorgeous grand purple dress, coupled with a pure white mink coat that draped over her shoulders. Her complexion was like pearls. A complex coronet had been placed on her head. Several gemstone necklaces had been put tightly around her neck.

Her lips were cheery red; her eyes were as bright as stars.

Eight maids had their heads lowered, attending behind her.

He Xia turned around, Yaotian smiled. She praised, "This is the first time I have seen Prince Consort dancing in the snow." Her gaze shifted beyond He Xia. Her voice was soft, "As expected of one of Gui Le's two famous qin players. I have heard of your fame, Miss Bai."

"Princess." Pingting's jade hands had left the qin as she slowly stood up from her chair, leaving the pavilion. She bowed at Yaotian who was standing behind the fake mountain.

He Xia's expression changed, quickly pasting a smile. "Why has Princess come at such an hour?" He packed the qin away, walked towards Yaotian and took her hand. "Why did you not call for me and stand on the snow in such cold weather?"

"To sword dance in the snow accompanied by qin is such a beautiful and rare scene. Why would I willingly break it?" Yaotian submissively let He Xia hold her hand.

They then went into the room together. The maids served up hot tea. The three lowered their heads as they tried it, each thinking deeply. They were silent as they watched the wisps of steam.

Yaotian had the most important identity and was naturally sitting in the centermost seat of the room. She tilted her head, assessing Pingting who was sitting by her side, for a long time. She suddenly smiled, "The song Miss Bai played just now was very nice. What is the name of the piece?"

Pingting placed her teacup down. Her manner was reasonable as she replied, "The piece's name is Nine Days."

"Nine Days?" Yaotian repeated as if chewing on the name. She nodded, "The piece is good and so is its name."

"Thank you, Princess."

"Could you play it again?"

Before Pingting could reply, He Xia happened to put down his cup. His voice was concerned, "Has Princess had dinner yet? Knowing that Princess was going to come, I specifically ordered the chefs to make some Gui Le desserts. Didn't Princess want to eat it again after trying it last time?"

He clapped twice, summoning a maid up. He told her, "Hurry, serve up the prepared desserts and a jug of the alcohol I brought back."

Not long later, the desserts and alcohol had been brought over. The desserts were indeed made by top notch chefs of Gui Le and were still steaming hot. Cute, coloured flowers had been carved on the tops of each. Five had been exquisitely arranged per plate. Each plate had a different colour on the top, indicating that the filling insides were different.

He Xia dismissed his maids and personally poured a cup of alcohol for Yaotian. Yaotian glanced at him and then stopped on Pingting, whose expression was unreadable. She then obediently lifted her head and drank the alcohol He Xia had prepared before eating two desserts. She remained quiet, her face calm.

“Pingting, you can taste one too.” He Xia looked at Pingting.

The table next to Pingting’s hand also had three or four dishes. She lowered her head and inspected them, shaking her head, “Master forgot that I don’t eat crushed apple desserts.”

“Of course I remember.” He Xia replied, “Did you not see the mark for shredded carrot? The apple filling has been replaced with shredded carrot filling mixed with honey.”

Pingting lifted a finger and broke it from the middle. There really was carrot stuffing in it with the smell of honey mixed into it. She carefully put it into her mouth, her eyes brightening. “These taste better than before. What did you put in?”

He Xia gave Yaotian a look before casually replying, “Nothing much, just used fresh honey. Yun Chang capital is placed close to the snowy mountains so this honey is from a type of bee unafraid of the cold.”

This surprisingly tasty desert with the flavour of home seemed to bring Pingting’s appetite with just one bite. She ate all five of the deserts on the table in one helping. Without hesitation, she ate each one which was about the size of a finger, gently filling her empty stomach. She then looked at He Xia’s table of desserts but didn’t say a word.

“Only yours has carrot filling. Ours aren’t. If I knew you’d like them so much, I would’ve ordered the chefs to prepare more.” He Xia’s gaze swept towards Yaotian, carefully asking, “Princess liked the flavour the chefs prepared from last time, so Princess’ are still the same. Would Princess like to try the shredded carrot filling?”

Yaotian’s expression was vague as she smiled. “I love the apple filling.” She then reached for the jug on the table.

He Xia helped her pour, but it was too late. Pingting had already taken the jug and helped pour a cup for Yaotian. A small, soft and friendly smile suddenly appeared on her face. “The snow has stopped and it seems the moon shall arrive soon. Why not open up the windows of the room, letting the moonlight filter through so that Princess can drink tea while listening to Pingting play the qin to relieve boredom with a little elegance?”

“Hm, that sounds like a good plan.” Yaotian nodded and called for the attendants to open the windows. The days of winter were short, and night fell one hour after they entered the room. It seemed that tomorrow would be a good day, as the moon and stars could be seen clearly.

The halo of moonlight filtered the hall like leaking water.

The maids quietly carried in and prepared a table for the qin. Not long later, the guqin He Xia had specifically bought for Pingting was carried in and placed neatly on the table.

Pingting lit the incense as usual and washed her hands, a solemn beauty already added to her face. She sat before the qin, took deep breath with her eyes closed. She placed her fingers lightly on the strings and hooked onto them.

The strings spat out a low vibrato as if choking back tears.

Yaotian listened to the sounds carefully, sighing. “Such a great qin. No wonder Prince Consort bought it despite the huge cost.”

Seeing He Xia, she half-sighed, half-exclaimed, “Yet only such a great qin could be worthy of being played by Bai Pingting.”

He Xia gave Yaotian a spoilt smile but didn’t say anything, using his gentle gaze to touch her heart.

Pingting tested the sound until she felt calm enough. She raised her head, "What would Princess like to hear?"

"Picking a song is too much of an important task for me and must be placed on someone familiar with qin." Yaotian's gaze softly fell on He Xia's face and she faintly said, "Please choose for me, Prince Consort."

He Xia thought for a while, asking, "Is Spring Scenes okay?"

Pingting nodded, closing her eyes in concentration. She collected her thoughts before quietly opening her eyes again. An additional spark of undeniable confidence shown.

She placed her hands softly on the strings before plucking familiarly at it.

The tone was different to before. It was a lively, playful sound that jumped into the eardrums.

Suddenly everything was full of life.

The qin sound was everywhere. Although it was winter, the winter chill seemed to be gone. It seemed that time hurried along, making people think that the season after winter, spring, had arrived.

Even the drones did not become irritated. It was like the continuous spring rain, gently and lively pattering on the walls.

Without a trace of impurity, without a trace of heaviness.

Everything was cheerful.

The birds chirped and flew throughout the forest as tender grass shoots appeared in the wet soil from the melting snow and ice. Everything, ready to put on a new coat.

Then silence, the little animals peeped out of their caves. They hurled towards the outside world not long later, greeting the first shy blossom in the forest.

Each act of spring was presented and expanded with the rich sound of qin. It seemed even the air was filled with the sweet scent of mud.

The people in the room listened, mesmerised and enchanted by the sights of three months' worth of spring.

The qin sound began to fall, as if the day was over.

The birds returned back to their nests; the small animals were now exhausted and went to look for an area to rest with clean water. The grass seemed to have grown very tall in just a day as the old trees calmly watched over them, smiling profoundly. A squirrel curled in its leaves, asleep.

After bustling activity came well deserved rest.

After a long pause, Yaotian finally shook herself awake. She sincerely praised, "I'm shocked the world has such fine qin sound. It must sound even better to Prince Consort, who has much better ears than mine and as a companion of Miss Bai since childhood."

Pingting received the praise but did not appear to look proud. She respectfully replied, "Pingting is currently living in the Prince Consort Residence. If Princess would like to listen to qin, summon me any time."

Yaotian took this quite well and she nodded smiling. "That sounds very good. Could you play more?"

“Of course. What would Princess like to hear?”

Yaotian thought for a little, asking, “Since that was about the scenes of spring, what about the other seasons? Do they have pieces too?”

“Yes. They are Summer Colours, Autumn Circadas and Winter Words.”

“Then...” Yaotian quietly instructed, “play all of them.”

Pingting answered, sat up a little straighter, lifted up her shoulders and placed her hands on the qin.

The melodious sound drifted out from the elaborately decorated windows and door, suspended in the air of the huge Prince Consort Residence.

Spring Scenes, Summer Colour, Autumn Circadas, and Winter Words.

Spring was full of beautiful scenery, summer was full of blooming colours, chirping cicadas filled autumn and the silence of winter.

In the flower-viewing pavilion of the Jing-An Ducal Residence, Pingting had improvised while He Xia considered and decided names for each.

Spring scenes floated past, summer went, autumn noisily finished, ending coolly, yet not cold.

It seemed that the qin sound had stripped down the borders of the residence, bringing in bits of nature. It was only long after the qin finally stopped did one become aware they had been too mesmerised and forgotten where they were.

Playing qin was extremely exhausting. Pingting barely managed to finish the three songs. Fatigue filled her face yet she touched the qin once more to play Winter Words.

He Xia seemed to have been worried for a while. He quickly reached out, stopping her. He turned to Yaotian, “Princess, it is winter and it will bring greater chills than already. It is not as meaningful as Spring Scenes, Summer Colours and Autumn Circadas. Shall we leave it at that and reflect on the pieces now?”

“Prince Consort is right.” Yaotian nodded her head, her curiosity not yet satisfied. She slowly remarked, “The last two pieces are special in their own way, but judging by their character, I prefer the Nine Days I heard in the courtyard.”

Pingting smiled before He Xia could answer. “Then let’s skip Winter Words for Nine Days, so Princess can hear it.”

He Xia guessed that Yaotian could see that Pingting was exhausted and was hoping she would refuse. However, Yaotian nodded while smiling, “Sure.”

He Xia was not happy but didn’t say anything. The light in his eyes dimmed a little though his expression did not change as he silently sat and listened.

As expected, Pingting sat up and hooked her fingers around the string, plucking it.

The plucked string began to vibrate, producing a beautiful sound, but it didn’t seem to be as clear as the original. He Xia was secretly alarmed by this and managed to listen for a while as the high notes were barely straight, highly unstable.

Pingting's breathing was heavy. Her shoulder shook a few times before shockingly fall backwards. He Xia was even more alarmed. He suddenly jumped out of his chair, almost falling onto Pingting. His expression paled, "Pingting! Pingting!"

"What's wrong?" Yaotian was surprised. She got up to study her.

He Xia did not reply. He grabbed Pingting's slender hand and picked her up horizontally from the waist. He carried her around the corridor and placed her on the bed. Only then did he murmur to Yaotian, "Her pulse is a little chaotic. She's probably tired from the bumpy ride."

Yaotian was stunned by this. She then replied, "I shouldn't have ordered her to play qin." An apologetic expression appeared on her face.

Surprisingly, He Xia did not comfort her like usual. He just passed on a few words, "She should be fine with some medicine and a few days of rest." He then picked up the brush on the desk in the room, personally writing a prescription. He then handed it to a maid who immediately went off to prepare.

He remained busy for a while and was afraid that even the sound of footsteps would disturb Pingting. He personally helped to close the mantle hanging around the bed. He then turned to see Yaotian standing behind him, not saying a word.

He Xia finally returned his attention on his wife. He softened his voice, "Is Princess tired? Princess' room has already been aired with fragrance, so would Princess please go rest there? I will be there shortly."

"No need." Yaotian's face who had always been full of tenderness now looked disinterested. She laughed drily, "I just came to see Prince Consort and had no intentions to spend the night here."

"Princess..."

"We are husband and wife. There's still a long time to go." Yaotian lowered her voice, "You should get a day of rest after just coming back. Sleep well tonight." Her gaze shifted away resolutely and glanced at the delicate figure deep inside the bed.

He Xia's voice was soft. "Then I'll go see you early tomorrow in the Royal Residence."

Although his voice was a sweet and frivolous as usual, his facial expression was also sincere. To Yaotian, his words seemed to be relieved.

"I'll get going."

"I'll accompany you to the Princess Residence."

Yaotian's chest felt bitter but she kept her emotions restrained after remembering her title. She shook her head, "No need."

The words were harsh and she knew that He Xia heard them. He stiffened and his intelligent eyes shifted to her.

Yaotian seemed to feel unnerved by his gaze. She deemed He Xia very important in her life and knew that if she gave him the impression of an annoying, naggy wife, then she would never have another chance at getting his love in her lifetime. She quickly hid her dissatisfaction and turned away. "Who isn't watching on the way? We're married, yet we still accompany you here and there like outsiders..."

He Xia began to gently chuckle. "Princess is thinking too much. We are married, not outsiders at all. If you're afraid of people laughing, then at least allow me to accompany you to the residence doors."

Yaotian didn't argue any more, revealing a girly smile as she let him take her hand.

The two lovingly walked until the main door. He Xia had offered countless sweet and tender words, putting a flower-like smile on Yaotian's face.

The royal guards outside had already prepared the carriage and the path home had been lit with flickering candles, bright like daytime.

He Xia personally helped Yaotian to board the carriage, squeezing a few more words in before standing at one side, watching the strong royal carriage team head in the direction of the Royal Residence in the silence of the night.

When the carriage was far away, reducing to a small dot in the distance, He Xia finally went in.

It was already deep within the night, and the earth was quiet.

Just like Pingting's qin, winter was silent.

Not heading back towards his own bedroom, he did not stop until he reached Pingting's bedroom. He entered the room and saw a frightened figure stand up from the bed. When she saw his face clearly, she hurriedly bowed, "Prince Consort." Unease was hidden in the depths of her eyes.

He Xia recognised her as Pingting's maid. He glanced at her, not particularly caring, and then moved towards Pingting's face, who laid on the bed.

His gaze became gentle.

Zuiju had been accompanying Pingting. She knew that He Xia's bedroom was on the other side of the residence and had not guessed that he would arrive at this time. Seeing He Xia walk to the bedside, Zuiju unwillingly moved away and stepped back. After all, he was the owner of this place.

He Xia didn't bother with the maid. He sat on the bed, carefully examining Pingting's pale white face. It had become a lot thinner.

He reached out, gently touching Pingting's face.

Zuiju looked at them, her hands and feet clenched into fists as her heart thumped wildly.

A man and woman in the dead of the night, not to mention in the privacy of a bedroom. It was so indecent that the skies would have cowered in shame.

Zuiju studied every movement He Xia made. Every touch and action around Pingting made Zuiju extremely nervous. She dearly wished that his fingers would leave her as soon as possible but was terrified that if they left, they would grope for an even creepier place.

Duke, what should I do?

If you don't come, a storm will.

For the first time in her life, Zuiju felt an extreme hatred and anger towards Chu Beijie.

When Zuiju became so nervous that she couldn't even breathe any more, He Xia finally stopped stroking Pingting's face and stood up from the bed. She then sighed in her relief, knowing that he'd watched enough and hoped with every inch of herself that he would leave soon. She hadn't expected that he would suddenly turn around and undo his belt, appearing to undress. His sharp eyes flickered to the pale-faced Zuiju, frowning, "Why are you just watching? You don't even know how to help undress?"

Pingting was still treated like how she was back in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, a maid over-cherished and did whatever she wanted. As a result, her maids were obedient without any arguments.

"Undress?" Zuiju's heart began to thunder as she glanced at the lonely, defenseless Pingting on the bed. A shiver ran up her spine.

"Prince Consort...would like to undress here?"

"Yes." He Xia replied. Seeing that she wasn't clever enough to come help him undress, he decided to do so without any help, taking off his outer layers. He didn't criticise however, seeing that she was Pingting's maid.

Zuiju realised that he did intend to sleep and was as anxious as ants in a burning pot. Even if she called for someone, all of the people in the Prince Consort Residence obeyed him. No one would even care. Not to mention, it was He Xia, someone that not even she or Pingting could stop.

Duke! What should I do?

"It is very late, you can go to sleep." He Xia instructed.

"Yes..."

Although Zuiju replied, her footsteps refused to leave. She bit down her lip and nervously studied her surroundings. Her gaze fell on and paused briefly on a stone. She quickly formed a plan and decided that if Pingting was in trouble, she would chuck it towards He Xia's head.

He Xia was a fighter, with quick reflexes, meaning that this attempt would most likely fail and she'd lose her life. She hoped that it could at least ease his eagerness.

As it was now, a weak woman was in trouble with a big man. Despite all her medical knowledge that could save so many lives, it was no use. What other options were there?

Thinking that much, she couldn't help take two small steps towards the small stone.

He Xia had already sat down on the bed, putting down the remaining half of the mantle. Through the veil, Zuiju saw that He Xia had already laid down next to Pingting. She took this opportunity to hide the small rock in her sleeve as she crept close.

Pingting seemed to stir at He Xia's movement. She groggily mumbled, "Hm" and moved around. Zuiju prepared herself, ready to fling the stone through the slit whenever she screamed. In the silence, however, she heard Pingting drowsily asking, "Master?" Her words were separated with a gap before muttering, "Why are you here?"

"It's a little warmer if I hold you."

A slight movement came from within the veil. It seemed He Xia was now hugging Pingting. Zuiju's nerves were strained; she listened tensely, but Pingting didn't make another sound as if asleep.

Zuiju kept the stone hidden in her sleeve, her hand drenched with sweat. She waited for a while until gentle barely audible breathing, barely audible came from within the veil. It really did seem both were asleep.

She was still not assured and gingerly lifted up the mouth of the mantle with a finger, peeking inside.

Pingting and He Xia were lying on the bed, using the same blanket, hugging each other while sleeping. They slept quietly, their eyelashes resting on their face, not suspecting the other. They slept like children.

Zuiju stared at them for a long time before her suspended heart was finally put to rest. She was stupefied. Just what was going on?

She took her hand away, watching the figures of the two people from the outside of the translucent veil. She considered her options and decided that it was best not to lower her guard. She held onto the stone and guarded by the bed.

Suffering for two hours, the weariness became heavier and heavier until her eyelids could lift no more.

Chapter 40

Pingting wanted Zuiju to use the seven needlless on her yesterday. She had felt uncomfortable after temporarily changing her pulse. Even though she had only played a few songs on the qin to test the Princess of Yun Chang, she had used up all of her available energy to do so. She laid on the bed, the familiar fragrance of Gui Le wafting in her nose. She knew that she was having yet another dream of the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

Everything was so calm and serene.

She comfortably played and joked around with He Xia, utterly carefree.

Time skipped to winter. The two were scared of the cold but wanted to stargaze at night. They had wrapped themselves in layers as they sat on the bed, watching until late into the night. When they got tired, they hugged each other to sleep without a single worry.

The two had been brought up together, did everything together. Despite their different opinions and personalities, they never thought such a thing was dirty and never realised that men and women were different.

The seniors in the Residence knew that Pingting's identity wasn't even enough for the lowest rank for a concubine, so they turned a blind eye to their relationship.

The fragrance of Gui Le was the scent of the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

Pingting loved this scent, saying it was comforting. Its fragrance was often present in her Master's room too.

She had her own room, but her Master's room was hers too. She had touched all of the interesting things in the room and entered all the time.

"It's a little warmer if I hold you." A seven year old boy said, full of desire to protect like always.

"Open the window."

“But Mother will yell at me again.” Even though He Xia said this, he didn’t hesitate to jump out of the snug bed. He pushed open the window and agilely wriggled back in, hugging the pale-faced Pingting. “It’s so cold!”

“Winter ought to be cold.”

“Go on! Who was the one sick in bed two days ago?”

The two young children chattered on, the echoes ringing in the ear.

She groggily woke up and saw He Xia’s familiar face jump into the corners of her eyes. Pingting shrank back, widening her eyes.

It wasn’t a dream.

“What’s wrong?” He Xia opened his eyes, smiling as he asked.

Pingting sat up and turned away, “Why is Master sleeping here?”

“We used to...”

“The past is the past, the present is the present.” Pingting stopped, fuming. “We’ve grown up.”

He Xia had rarely seen Pingting angry and couldn’t help feeling a little shocked. It was a while before he sneered, “True, we’ve grown up, and our hearts have changed too.” He got off the bed, picking up his own clothes to put on.

Zuiju had curled up by the wall and slept through the night. She heard some muffled sounds and rubbed her eyes, standing up in the corner. The useless stone remained in her hand.

He Xia saw her and he turned back to Pingting. He lowered his voice, “No need to worry, your maid is even more worried than you are. The object in her hand has caught the light of the sun. No matter what I do, how could she possibly even begin to stop me?” He had always been a charismatic man, but after this night, even though he had no ill intentions, his charisma was completely shattered in their eyes until not a trace was left.

Pingting had known He Xia for all these years. The two had an unbreakable bond, but she had never put the feelings between man and woman into it. Even when she had heard about being taken as his wife, she had never thought too much about it. Hearing He Xia’s words just then made her feel both scared and angry. Her face paled.

“Have I ever forced you at any time since we were young?” He Xia’s heart had been engulfed by the fire of annoyance as he gritted his teeth. “Chu Beijie is the one that wants your body not your heart. Don’t mistake me for him.”

Pingting only felt that her heart had been cut with a sharp knife, causing it to no longer support her body. She began to sway.

Zuiju suddenly yelled, “Miss!”

He Xia was also alarmed by this and hurriedly went forwards to support her. He massaged her back, softening his voice, “I said the wrong thing, calm down.” Whenever he had annoyed Pingting in the past, he had said the same thing. His words were more instinctive than anything else. It also helped calm himself down.

Zuiju brought up hot water and Pingting drank a sip. Pingting’s eyes flickered towards He Xia and saw genuine concern in his eyes. She then remembered that she had to do every trick, tactic and plan to get away from this familiar person. Her heart was filled with sorrow. Not quite sure whether her tone should be happy or angry, she ended up whispering “Is Master heading out today?” after a while.

“Anything wrong?”

Pingting saw that he was holding onto her wrist and was terrified that the effects from Zuiju’s acupuncture had lifted, leading to He Xia’s discovery of her plan. Her expression didn’t change however, “Nothing much. If Master isn’t heading out, then draw Pingting so that even if one day Pingting is gone, Master still has something to remember.”

He Xia snorted, “What rubbish. Are you not here for me to see? If you’re gone, I will go through the heavens and earth to retrieve you.”

“What heavens and earth? Do you really take those words seriously?” Pingting faintly retorted back, thinking of the various vows she had made with Chu Beijie.

Through the heavens and earth, to the end of the earth and to its highest and lowest points.

For this lifetime and the following lives, vows lasted through life and death.

“Get on the horse. From then on, you will no longer be called Bai Pingting, you will be Chu.”

Words not to be taken seriously, yet she had really believed in them.

How could she take them seriously? She had her good dream and woken from it.

The sour taste of grief welled up at the tip of her nose. While she was momentarily caught up, tears the size of beans began to fall.

He Xia however, did not realise that her thoughts had drifted faraway. He comforted her, “Every word I say is the truth. Don’t cry, I won’t go anywhere today and draw a very pretty picture of you, so you can display it in your room, okay?”

Pingting’s expression was full of suffering and was even more upset when she heard He Xia’s soft words of comfort. She put out all of her hatred against Chu Beijie.

She then remembered the fetus inside her and didn’t cry out. She whimpered, gradually removing the sound until she stopped.

Although He Xia knew that the Princess was still waiting for him at the Royal Residence, the Princess was much easier to please. Pingting was wiser and more intelligent, making her much more difficult to persuade. He had been the one to set a trap to deeply crack her heart. Seeing the current Pingting so weak, He Xia naturally refused to let go of such an easy way to win her trust. He asked someone to pass on a message to the Royal Residence, quickly conjuring up a random excuse. He then took out a piece of paper and picked up the brush, carefully drawing Pingting.

Yaotian slept even worse than Zuiju that night.

When returning to the Royal Residence, she had looked around the brilliant halls of gold and the glittering bead curtains as well as the maids that attended her. The more she looked, the more uncomfortable she felt. She regretted the anger felt when marching away from the Prince Consort Residence.

He Xia sword dancing in the snow while Bai Pingting playing an extraordinary accompaniment on the qin was a satisfaction that Yaotian could never give to He Xia in her lifetime. She could only give and had given normal day to day actions, carrying out something like a flawless transaction.

Although unwilling to admit she knew deep down what each other really wanted

Yaotian could barely suppress the sour taste in her heart and mind. She lay out on the bed, tossed and turned sleeplessly until it became the hour for her to get up.

A man's heart was never easy to capture, not to mention, from all of the people possible, she had chosen the famous Marquess of Jing-An.

Thinking of the words He Xia had said the night before sent Yaotian's heart sank, she got dressed and told Luyi to reject the other officials who tried to see her. She concentrated on He Xia's arrival.

Unexpectedly, after a long period of waiting, He Xia did not come. He sent a messenger who had said He Xia was carefully thinking about the frontlines and could not temporarily come to the Royal Residence today. Although the messenger followed He Xia's instructions and put in several good words for him, Yaotian sent him back with a cold expression. She stayed alone in the room, waiting for a long time before ordering Luyi. "Go bring the Senior Official here."

Gui Changqing immediately settled the documents he had been going through and hurried over as soon as he heard the command.

"Have a seat, Senior Official." Yaotian's expression was twisted as she said this. Her face was filled with anxiety at first, but she didn't know where to begin when seeing Gui Changqing came in. She sat up straight and looked at him in the eye, asking, "It seems that Dong Lin's army will be finished assembling soon, meaning that Prince Consort will be hurrying to the border in a few days. Are all resource preparations complete? Have people been sent to check the most important resource, food?"

"All preparations are complete." Gui Changqing was used to doing such things and had promptly prepared everything. Even though he was listening to Yaotian's questions, his eyes missed nothing. He replied carefully and saw that Yaotian was just nodding absently. Hearing enough, she didn't ask for any more.

No one understood the Princess' personality more than Gui Changqing, and the people in the Royal Residence had told him about the Princess' return from the Prince Consort Residence last night. He immediately guessed what she was thinking and changed the topic, "I will make sure, with all my ability, that there are enough resources at the border so that the Prince Consort will not have to worry about them. It's just...when is the Prince Consort heading to the front lines?"

Yaotian brooded over for a while before sighing. "I thought for a long time about Gui Changqing's words last night. Yes, I must worry about both the present and the future, but it seems that the present worries are much more scary than future considerations."

Gui Changqing asked, "Princess has already met Bai Pingting?"

"Correct."

"What kind of person is she?" Even though Gui Changqing was wise with age, he couldn't help be a little curious.

The chaotic world with low morals should have been the word of men.

Soldiers and horses, heads of the executed, all that scattered blood and the fame, achievements that came with it were supposed to be in their hands.

Women, —if they were born into noble families —their real power, came after a union in marriage to someone suited of their rank. If they were peerless beauties, then they would become the legends that drifted around the heroes during troubled times

Bai Pingting was the only exception.

She was born a maid, had an ordinary face, yet repeatedly changed the power distribution of the four countries. She had created Gui Le's five year truce, won the battle of Kanbu in Bei Mo and even the imminent battle between Dong Lin and Yun Chang was complicatedly related to her.

"What kind of person is she?" It seemed that Yaotian wasn't sure of the answer herself. Her very delicate eyebrow furrowed slightly, trying to recall the Bai Pingting she had seen yesterday and remained deep in thought, before saying, "The feeling you get when with Bai Pingting is very hard to describe. I'll put it this way, when I first saw Bai Pingting, I suddenly felt that all of the varied praises about her were real. Indeed, she seemed like the woman who had ordered troops and challenged Chu Beijie in the battle of Bei Mo. I felt that she had the soldiers' approval, not just the command flag. For someone to stand up to Chu Beijie so equally matched on the battlefield is something truly unbelievable, but when you see Bai Pingting, even that seems completely normal like water filling its container. You think it's something she had done, did."

Gui Changqing didn't let go of any traces of expression on Yaotian's face. He lowered his voice, "Does Princess think that if a woman like Bai Pingting was severely hurt by a man, she would ever forgive him?"

"Hurt?" A little bit of suspicion leaked into Yaotian's eyes, "Why hurt?"

"For something else, he broke their promise and did not return in time, resulting her being forced to Yun Chang."

"Chu Beijie?"

"Correct."

Yaotian asked incredulously, "Why did Senior Official suddenly mention this?"

"I have already sent someone to ask around the Prince Consort Residence about the context of Bai Pingting's arrival. From what I see, Bai Pingting has lost her faith in Chu Beijie, and as long as Bai Pingting doesn't forgive Chu Beijie, then Chu Beijie will forever feel hatred towards the Royal House of Dong Lin."

Yaotian's thoughts were not on Chu Beijie. She faintly asked, "Was that not the intention of the alliance with Bei Mo?"

It seemed that after a problem was about to be solved, another vexing problem had appeared. Which was more dangerous, having Bai Pingting by Chu Beijie or He Xia's side?

Gui Changqing smiled gently, murmuring, "Princess, Bai Pingting is now useless."

Yaotian studied Gui Changqing's expression and was surprised. Her voice was nervous, "Senior Official means..." She stretched out her hand and lightly made a gesture.

"Absolutely not." Gui Changqing shook his head. "If Bai Pingting dies, then Chu Beijie will rabidly lead his soldiers to attack my Yun Chang. It will become a war without rest. Not to mention...does Princess know where the Prince Consort slept last night? And his whereabouts right now?"

Yaoting was secretly alarmed by what she heard. Her face calmed down, "Did he not sleep at the Prince Consort Residence?"

"From my reports from the Prince Consort Residence, the Prince Consort stayed and slept in Bai Pingting's room, according to the maid that came with Bai Pingting from Dong Lin."

Yaotian's expression became incredibly twisted. She abruptly got up and took several deep breaths towards the window. She took several moments to recover before murmuring, "Continue."

"The Prince Consort is not dealing with military affairs today. He is staying in his residence to draw a portrait of Pingting."

Yaotian's heart seemed to be attached to its final stems. Her fingers tightly gripped the windowsill. With enough force to make her joints completely white, her sharp nails left several deep marks on its carved wood.

She drew a long breath, raised her hand and stared at her now-damaged, long, pink fingernails that had been well maintained for such a long time. She sighed, "If Bai Pingting died, not only Chu Beijie would go crazy, but the Prince Consort would too." Her voice became freezing cold, "Can Senior Official think of a plan for me? Chu Beijie is pressing for war, while Bai Pingting is in the Prince Consort's Residence. What can I do to not sever my ties with the Prince Consort?"

"I have a very simple method that can solve all problems."

"Oh?" Yaotian turned towards him, looking at the extremely confident Gui Changqing.

Gui Changqing gave her a small smile of wisdom and cleared his throat. "Please allow me to outline the plan to Princess. Chu Beijie was crazed by lust and forcefully stole the Prince Consort's maid. The Prince Consort had always cherished Bai Pingting and refused to let any harm come to her hence he plotted to bring Bai Pingting to Yun Chang. Our Yun Chang has not done anything wrong, correct?"

Yaotian thought for a moment and understood some of his intention. She nodded, "Bai Pingting was a maid of the Jing-An Ducal Residence and the Marquess of Jing-An saved her from the clutches of the Duke of Zhen-Bei which is perfectly normal. Our Yun Chang has done nothing wrong, so Dong Lin has no reason to send out troops."

Gui Changqing secretly praised her wit and adoringly looked at her, continuing, "Princess you are wrong. Regardless if there is a reason or not, as long as Bai Pingting is in our hands, Chu Beijie would definitely send out his troops."

Realisation flashed in Yaotian's eyes. "You mean...we must not have Bai Pingting in our hands?"

"Yes. The Prince Consort went to save Bai Pingting, not to harm Bai Pingting. And what excuse would Chu Beijie have to declare war with if Bai Pingting wasn't in Yun Chang?"

"We can free Bai Pingting when the Prince Consort leaves?" Yaotian thought for a while and shook her head.

"Impossible, we had wasted a significant amount of military power in acquiring Bai Pingting from Dong Lin. How could we just free her like that? Not to mention, if the Prince Consort knew, he would undoubtedly be furious."

"As long as Bai Pingting does not return to Chu Beijie's side, then the military power Yun Chang used to threaten Dong Lin's borders will not be wasted." Gui Changqing was indeed wise and thought carefully about everything. "Bai Pingting begged Princess to let her go. Doesn't the Prince Consort cherish her a lot and treats her like his own sister? No one can possibly blame Princess for pitying her after listening. Remember, Princess, the reason offered why the Prince Consort asked to use the army was to sever the ties between Chu Beijie and the Royal House. Now that the original goal has been reached, what other reason does the Prince Consort have to force Bai Pingting to stay? Did he have other intentions in mind when asking Princess to use the troops? It can't be that my Yun Chang's spent so much national strength to just let the Prince Consort steal a single woman off Chu Beijie?"

Each word was harsher than the last as if reflecting Yaotian's mind. Yaotian took it in with delight and revealed a smile. "Senior Official is right; the Yun Chang army was mobilised for the good of the country and was definitely not used to allow the Prince Consort to steal a woman from Chu Beijie. If the Prince Consort blames Bai Pingting's

departure on me, then how could he explain to my Yun Chang's generals? I understand." The plan had hatched in her mind. She no longer worried about failure. Her eyes flashed with the light of decision that only the Royal House had.

"Princess finally understands." Gui Changqing smiled, pleased. "There are still a few details that must be carefully discussed. Even if we let go of Bai Pingting, we still have to convince Chu Beijie about it. If Chu Beijie is not convinced that we secretly killed Bai Pingting despite releasing her, it could lead to disaster."

"When releasing her, we will make her sign a note saying that she left of her own will. It shouldn't be hard." Yaotian said, "It's just...when we release her, we can never control her whereabouts again. If she returns to Chu Beijie's side, or even the Prince Consort's side, then wouldn't our efforts have gone in vain?"

"Rest assured, Princess. Bai Pingting bitterly hates Chu Beijie and is unlikely to return to Dong Lin." Gui Changqing had obviously put a lot of thought into this problem. "Bai Pingting treasures both Chu Beijie and the Prince Consort a lot. If we take her pride and arrogance, then there is one method that can cause her to never see either man again."

"What method?"

Gui Changqing seemed to be unable to speak and slightly hesitated. He finally lowered his voice, "It is a chaotic world and there are all sorts of people who do not obey the law. If Bai Pingting goes out on the road alone and happened to meet some bandits, then..." He left off the final words, saying, "Then how could she face other people? If some unnamed bandit on the road violated her, then even if she becomes the most shameful beggar, she will not be related to our Yun Chang at all. Even if Chu Beijie finds her, there is no chance of her being with him again. Chu Beijie would still hate the Royal House of Dong Lin for this. After all, they were the ones who agreed to the exchange and sacrificed Chu Beijie's beloved woman."

Yaotian was still a woman and thought for a while, her expression changing. When Gui Changqing finished, she shook her head. "That's no good. Does Senior Official have any other plans?"

"Not dead, but a life even worse than death. There is no better method."

"But..."

"Princess! Princess must not hesitate. The Dong Lin army is at the border, and the Prince Consort's intentions are emerging. If we don't rid ourselves of Bai Pingting, then the country is at stake." Gui Changqing's voice was earnest. He murmured, "Princess only needs to see Bai Pingting when the Prince Consort leaves, save a few warm words to her and make her leave a note. Then you can let her go and I shall arrange the rest, without any evidence."

A complicated light flashed in Yaotian's eyes. She thought a little but still shook her head.

"Princess! Princess! Listen to my heartfelt words..."

Gui Changqing wanted to say more, but was stopped by Yaotian who turned towards him. "Leave for now, Senior Official. Allow me time to think."

Gui Changqing raised his head and saw her stubborn back. He knew no words could change her mind so he obeyed orders and bowed. "I depart." He sighed heavily and went through the bead curtain.

Yaotian's back didn't move for a long time as if solidified to a rock statue.

Luyi walked in, reporting from the other side of the curtain. "Princess, outside..."

"Go away!" Yaotian thundered loudly. She abruptly turned around and grabbed something on the table to throw outside. The Fanonian rouge, used the night before, flew outside of its oiled box.

The sudden sound stopped before Luyi, scattering until the earth bled red.

Bai Pingting, Bai Pingting of Jing-An Ducal Residence.

You directed Gui Le's life and death, directed Bei Mo's life and death, directed Dong Lin's life and death. Now you play qin, smile softly to direct my Yun Chang's life and death?

How could I let the strings under your fingers direct my dignified country of Yun Chang as well the dignified Princess of Yun Chang?

How could I let you ruin my country, ruin my home?

Yaotian bit her lip and tore the window curtain, inch by inch.

Dong Lin and Yun Chang were to encounter the other at the borders. The battle drums sounded in preparation.

The sound was slow and lifeless as if coming from the distance. It seemed to be like the ancient melodies of the heaven and earth, hiding its true potential as they continued.

By the time flags covered the sun and moon, the Dong Lin army had finished assembling. Looking afar, it seemed like the camp full of calm eyes and the cold gleam of weapons covered for endless square miles.

The wind rustled on the plains.

The lightness of the dew on the grass in the morning seemed to have evaporated by the murderous intention of the soldiers until not a trace was left.

“Duke, the Dragon Wolf Barracks have also arrived.”

When Chu Beijie heard the news, he raised his hand to open the door's curtain and walked out of the advisory tent. He stood up straight. As steady as a mountain, his piercing gaze turned downwards to look at the neatly lined up army before him.

The army had already assembled.

The flags covered every inch of the sky and faces of young, yet fearless faces stared up at him. All of them made up the important force that protected Dong Lin.

Chu Beijie quietly watched them all.

“How is the situation back at the capital?” After a long time, he whispered to Chen Mu, behind him.

Chen Mu sighed. “The King has already consecutively sent sixteen handwritten letters ordering Duke to immediately withdraw the army, with an unprecedented harsh tone. Does Duke really not want to see the King's letters?”

A shiny trace of resolution flashed in Chu Beijie's eyes. His voice was cold. “If I read one of his letters, then I have already lost Pingting.”

Ze Yin's messenger had finally brought the truth.

A letter saying whether Bai Pingting had really murdered Dong Lin's two princes or not

But what use did it do?

Even if Bai Pingting had really murdered the two princes, he had already decided to love her anyway. Even if Pingting hadn't murdered the two princes, the King and Queen had still used her as a bargaining chip.

In such a chaotic world, what use was the truth?

Chu Beijie hated it and detested himself.

A personal letter from his Brother had startled him out of his cozy secluded residence, jolting him away from his everything.

But he didn't have any excuse. He was the one who chose to abandon it.

Since knowing about Concubine Li's birthday, he'd realised that the blood of the Royal House was at stake. He decided what to do, he chose his path for himself.

It had been his biggest mistake in his life, and he regretted the decision he made then.

He knew that his Brother and He Xia had used this method to make Pingting see her place in Chu Beijie's heart, so that when she realised that no matter how much Chu Beijie loved Bai Pingting, he made his final decision, the one to abandon her.

For Pingting who considered love to be as important as water, it was a fatal blow.

The heartbreaking pain never stopped for Chu Beijie the moment he realised this.

"As long as Duke is worried about Pingting, what else matters? Even if these two hands go to waste and can never play qin again?" She had looked profoundly at him and gave her everything to him without a qualm.

She had sung songs in his arm, politely listening to his worries.

That proud, arrogant heart.

That exquisitely made heart had spent all that effort in letting him know how much she cared for him as well as how troubling it was.

Every word she once said ached in Chu Beijie's heart, and every expression she had made Chu Beijie's heart shatter.

He had never known that memories could drive someone mad.

The army had already been assembled.

Pingting, I will soon march towards Yun Chang.

I will sacrifice everything to bring back my Duchess.

I must personally tell you that even everything in the world cannot compare to your smiling face. In Chu Beijie's heart, there is nothing more important than you.

We'll talk about a sky-shattering, earth-rumbling love —this time, a real one. No matter the thousands of twists and turns that will never change

The sound of hooves caused Chu Beijie to turn back. A dirty, mud-caked Luoshang jumped off the horse and dashed towards to kneel before Chu Beijie. “Duke!”

“How is the secluded residence? How is Moran?”

After the battle at the secluded residence, Moran and many other guards, including enemy soldiers, had suffered great injuries. Luoshang’s injuries were the lightest of them all. He was ordered to stay to clear out the residence while tending to his injured brothers.

Luoshang reported, “Half of the secluded residence was burned to ashes and cleared up. The dead have also been buried. A doctor has been healing my brothers who survived, and Moran’s health has improved. However, Juntian, he...he didn’t survive.”

Chu Beijie’s face looked dejected.

He had taught each of these guards and promoted them personally. Each of them were young , strong, and passionate. How could one not feel heartbroken at such loss?

“Duke...” Luoshang still had something important he had not yet said. He carefully hesitated before beginning his report, when seeing Chu Beijie’s expression. “When we cleared out Miss Zuiju’s room, we saw that she had left behind several bottles of medicine, as well as a few prescriptions...”

“Bottles of medicine?” Chu Beijie’s voice was curt, “Did Pingting get sick while I was away?”

“I asked the doctors to check out the bottles of medicine and they said...said...” Luoshang looked uncomfortably up to Chu Beijie and immediately lowered his eyes again, “that it was fetal medicine. The doctor also looked at the prescriptions, saying they were for unborn children as well.”

A sudden silence that seemed to shroud their heads floated in the air.

Chu Beijie’s deeply shocked expression sharply fell on somewhere behind Luoshang as if trying to drill two holes into the ground.

Pingting was pregnant...

In her delicate belly, she had his own flesh and blood!

The heartbroken Pingting was taken away carrying his child!

Even with all the injuries he had suffered on the battlefields put together, it could never deliver such a painful blow to Chu Beijie at that moment of realisation.

The stone that had trampled on his heart seemed a thousand times heavier, squeezing out the deepest blood.

His heart was numbed in pain; his body was as stiff as a fossil.

“Send troops.” Chu Beijie sorrowfully looked up with a command.

“Duke?”

Chu Beijie’s eyes were like a massive, raging bonfire burning. He emphasised every word, “Pass on the order. All soldiers camp on this road before officially heading towards Yun Chao!”

Pingting. My child. Please wait for a little longer.

I will immediately gallop to your side.

Chu Beijie then swore to the skies.

I will protect you forever, love you forever and never let anyone or anything separate us again forever.

As you wished, no matter what happens, no matter the thousands of twists and turns in our love, our minds will never change.

Chapter 41

The day the Dong Lin army officially embarked on its journey to Yun Chang was also the day He Xia said his goodbyes to the Princess and rushed from the capital to the border.

Most of the Yun Chang army had already been placed on standby near the army. They mustered enough courage against the fearless Dong Lin advisor, Chu Beijie, by preparing every single corner of the border. After all, all knew that only the Duke of Zhen-Bei could defeat the Marquess of Jing-An. Yun Chang placed their faith in the Marquess of Jing-An, knowing with him leading their army, it was an evenly matched showdown against Chu Beijie.

The flags covered the sky as usual while the battle drums shook the skies. It seemed a little less sad than usual. The atmosphere was replaced by fierce determination.

He Xia wore handsome new clothes. He seemed to be in high spirits as hundreds of gazes from officials rested on him. Only the Prince Consort could defeat Chu Beijie at the moment. Yun Chang's fate, victory or defeat, in the battle were in his hands. Under the thousands of gazes, He Xia's expression was both prideful and stern. He turned to look at the Princess who handed him a cup of alcohol to send him off as luck. His eyes stopped on the Princess' charming face and he smiled. Although he didn't say a word, that one smile was enough.

All of the thousands of words Yaotian had melted into a single, deep affectionate gaze. She knew that even if she didn't want him to leave, his departure was imminent. She whispered, saying, "Be utterly careful, Prince Consort."

He Xia watched her calmly at first, At this remark, he suddenly revealed a very pleased, charming smile. He relaxed and murmured in her ear, "There is one question that all of the hundred officials of Yun Chang below have asked. I thought for sure that Princess would ask too, but it seems I guessed wrong."

"Why should I ask?" Yaotian's expression was piercing as she muttered, "Prince Consort is a true hero and will not lose to a mere Chu Beijie."

He Xia quickly laughed and turned to launch onto his horse.

The flag behind him flew in the sky. He Xia's gaze looked around at the various officials before deeply studying Yaotian. The sole master of the country waved softly alongside the other officials, sending him off. He Xia noticed that it wasn't his first experience of this kind of heroism and honour.

His opponent was still Chu Beijie.

But today, the sending party was not the King of Gui Le, He Su, and he was not departing from the capital of Gui Le. The country he was protecting was not Gui Le either.

The inseparable figure beside him was not Pingting either.

If he brought back Chu Beijie alive and imprisoned him in the Prince Consort Residence, then what would Bai Pingting do when she saw him?

He Xia's gaze flickered towards all of the soldiers and generals, ready for departure. He held his sword up to the wind.

"Set off!"

The sound of wheels and hooves began, slowly, as if trying to wake up the sleeping world with its regular rumbling.

Yellow mud flew.

From that point on, all of Yun Chang's army finally belonged to He Xia's hands. To counter Dong Lin, Yaotian had to leave no other reserves without hesitation.

The yellow sand and mud at the borders was soon to be wetted with blood, covering the entire plains with its scent. No matter how many people's lives were sacrificed, the rage between him and Chu Beijie was a feud destined by the skies a long time ago. It had to come to an end.

He had to win.

From the back, the view of He Xia on his horse was proud and full of confidence.

Yaotian went onto the highest platform of the capital walls, sending off the figure of He Xia with her eyes.

As a famous general, he rose to places beyond her reach.

The wind was strong at the high points, causing the pendants on Yaotian's coronet to sway without rest. It seemed to sway her own heart, hit by the whip of the strong wind.

"The Prince Consort will win. He will definitely defeat Chu Beijie." Yaotian's expression was relaxed.

The guards watched over her ten feet away. There had been many officials behind her at one time, but only the highest ranking Gui Changqing had climbed up with her.

Gui Changqing just stood behind Yaotian, the back view of He Xia also reflected in his eyes. It had already become a tiny dot, soon to disappear in the far distance.

Gui Changqing's voice was low. "I always put all my confidence in the Prince Consort, but to fight a war for a woman is not worth it. Do so many sons of Yun Chang really have to be sacrificed to fight Chu Beijie's army? Princess has seen many are young, hot-blooded men of nobles. If this pointless battle is not stopped, then how many of them will be able to return to the capital?" He turned to look at Yaotian. "There is not enough time. Has Princess decided yet?"

The strong wind seemed to get even stronger. It seemed like the faraway flag of Yun Chang's Royal House was protesting with its loud fluttering sound. Yaotian took a deep breath of the wind before her face became serious, harsh with resolution. "I have."

She turned towards the inner wall of the capital, searching and locking her gaze on the towers of the Prince Consort Residence. The Bai Pingting who could change the overall situation was imprisoned there.

The sound of the army setting off was a roar that shook the skies. Even the Prince Consort Residence had been able to catch a faint remnant of its sound.

Zuiju listened, laughing excitedly. “Miss Bai, He Xia has set off!”

Without a clever guy like He Xia around, escaping from the Prince Consort Residence with Pingting’s intelligence didn’t seem to difficult.

“What do we do now? Use acupuncture or medicine?” Zuiju tried to think of radical ways. “He Xia’s presence made us unable to take any action easily, so we don’t know the situation outside at all...why not do this, I’ll check the arrangement of the guards around the Prince Consort Residence as well as the roads outside. Sigh, if only we had a map of Yun Chang’s city. Perhaps there’d be a map in He Xia’s office? Why don’t we...”

“No need.” Pingting softly said these two words.

Zuiju didn’t understand. “No need?”

“No need to waste our own energy.”

“We don’t have much time. If we don’t quickly use this chance to escape, then you...” Zuiju looked left and right warily, lowering her voice, “They’ll see your stomach.”

Pingting looked down at her stomach that had yet to protrude. It brought back the gentle sense of motherhood. She couldn’t help but softly stroke it before saying to Zuiju, “How do you think the Princess of Yun Chang treats He Xia?”

Zuiju knew that Pingting’s question was not an easy one. She thought carefully, before replying, “I peeked out a few times when she came last time. She is very beautiful and suits He Xia. From what I see, she really cares about He Xia.”

“Indeed, she does.” Pingting nodded, “Ever since that time, I have never seen that Princess again as if she has forgotten my existence.”

Zuiju seemed to connect the clues but asked anyway, “Why suddenly mention her if it seems the two are unconnected?”

Pingting slowly shifted her gaze towards the ceiling. Her voice was brief and light, “The arrow has been clipped onto the string, drawn but not fired. It’s not that one doesn’t want to fire it but waiting for an appropriate time. The more she appears to not care about an existence, the more she actually cares.”

“She was waiting for He Xia to leave?” Zuiju lowered head and thought, realisation suddenly coming to her. “A wife’s jealousy is the most poisonous, not to mention that she is a princess. What if she decides to kill you while He Xia is away?”

Pingting confidently shook her head. “Even amongst jealous wives, there are stupid ones and clever ones. Yaotian is the Princess of Yun Chang who chose He Xia who had nothing apart from a worthless title from a foreign country out of all of her more familiar soldiers. She is undoubtedly not a foolish woman. She knows very well that He Xia painstakingly brought me here and cherishes me. If she were to direct my death, then their relationship as husband and wife is over. Not to mention, if I died, He Xia may temporarily refrain from attacking her, seeing that she is a Princess. But Chu...” She realised what she was going to say and abruptly stopped as the name almost came out of her lips. Pingting’s expression changed and she angrily closed her lips.

Zuiju had already understood her meaning anyway and continued the rest. “The Duke wouldn’t let her go.” She slowly sighed before saying, “The Duke has definitely gone against the King’s orders this time and decided to send troops to attack Yun Chang no matter what. That’s...still...giving up everything for you.”

“Don’t say any more.” Pingting suddenly stood up. She had intended to walk out but seemed to change her mind for some reason. She stood with her back to Zuiju, whispering, “What has our relationship have to do with soldiers? All of the blood spilled and the loss of human life in this upcoming battle between Dong Lin and Yun Chang are all the results of the sins between him and me.”

Zuiju sighed, upset and exasperated. “What on earth do you want to Duke to do then? What can the Duke even do?”

Pingting’s back seemed to stiffen at her words, slowly dragging out her words. “I don’t want anything and he doesn’t need to do anything.”

“Miss...”

“Who was the one who swore to the other to always be together? Who said Bai Pingting couldn’t leave both the House of Jing-An or Chu Beijie?” Pingting cut off her words, her tone becoming very harsh. “I had been taught by the Duke and Duchess to be loyal, love your country, uphold your values and protect the moral good. What good has it done? People have to hold onto values and protect the moral good but can’t they live for themselves just once.”

She turned, looking towards the stunned Zuiju. She slowly said, “You all know that I am intelligent and know that intelligent people are always about reason, having reason in everything they do. Even if others are to ask a million whys, answers are always without flaw. Zuiju, I don’t care how wronged your Duke is or has a reason as big as the sky to why he couldn’t come back. I never want to hear his name again and never see his person either. I am not an official of the court and therefore not all of my decisions need to be logical to the end. I am a living person. Why should anyone else apart from me direct what I like and what I hate? I just want to live quietly with my child, is that wrong?”

Her voice was like a qin, clear and lingered in the silent room.

Zuiju couldn’t answer with a single word.

The best of both worlds was never possible. Chu Beijie could only choose one and he had chosen to protect the Royal House, chosen to hurt Pingting.

Then, he might as well continue to protect the Royal House.

He might as well let Pingting go.

Even though it was a strained decision, it was still a decision.

Even though it was strained, it was still a door to hurt. How could one’s heart not hurt with a wound?

Who was the one who swore to the other to always be together?

Bai Pingting was still a mere woman in the very end. Why should someone insist that she had to protect the moral good, uphold values and think for the best for the peasants of the country?

Even if an unreasonable man remained unreasonable for life, that in itself was perfectly reasonable. Yet it seemed the ones who were reasonable throughout their lives were blamed the most for just following their own heart for once.

The world was like that more unreasonable than its people.

Seeing Pingting's tearstained face, Zuiju suddenly understood.

She still loved Chu Beijie.

Deeply loved him yet deeply despised him.

She despised Chu Beijie for not fulfilling his promise, hated that they shared the same life, forever controlled by their values and the moral good and helplessly punished for trying to escape from it.

But before their values and the moral good, it was sadly very difficult to keep just an inkling of pure love.

What this gentle person wanted, what she so desperately wanted, was something she would never get.

If she couldn't get it, she would abandon it.

Abandon it and never look back.

Escaping from Chu Beijie, escaping from the deep hatred for her country.

"Miss Bai, do whatever you want then." Zuiju's eyelashes were trembling as a teardrop of crystal fell from them. She raised her head to look up at Pingting, softening her voice. "It truly is amazing for one to make their own choice just once in their entire lifetime."

As if agreeing, the final layer of melting ice on the outside of the window broke off.

Pingting's gloomy expression wavered and suddenly knelt down, grabbing onto Zuiju.

Zuiju also tightly hugged her, biting her lip and stifling her sobs.

Do it, do it.

A person's lifetime needed love, hate, decision and reason to fight for it.

To chase that uncatchable wind of the skies.

"Don't be an intelligent person anymore." Zuiju choked as she whispered into her ear.

Be a normal woman, a happy mother who no longer talks about their fears, a dear woman who upheld values and protected the moral good.

Everyone has the right to happiness.

Don't worry about the fire of Dong Lin, the battles of Yun Chang. Go to somewhere far away and never look back.

Tell your healthy and beautiful child that people can make decisions for themselves.

That people, are capable of crying comfortably but are also capable of laughing loudly.

That people, are capable of being rational but are also capable of acting from feelings.

"Who was the one who swore to the other to always be together? You're right."

“A hurt heart is a hurt heart. Even if you say it’s to uphold values and protect the moral good, will the wounds on it disappear?”

“No.”

They couldn’t.

On the day the Dong Lin army approached and the day He Xia departed from the capital, Bai Pingting and Zuiju held each other, bursting into loud tears.

This was the first time that they had cried unreservedly since coming to Yun Chang. They let out all of the tears from their hearts, freely venting all of them out.

The winter sun pushed away the clouds around it. It too sprinkled light unreservedly on the two. It understood that these two weak women desperately needed its power.

“We must get out of here.”

“Yes, we must.”

They nodded resolutely at each other, bathed in strong sunlight.

Pingting wiped away her tears and stood up once more. She seemed even more upright than before. Under the haze of the sun, she seemed to have a halo of many colours, resembling the glow unique to jade.

She had power and power was in her belly. There was a tiny life in there, and Bai Pingting could no longer afford to slack off.

She stood up straight, standing firmly onto the ground.

The servants outside the door called just at the right time.

“Princess Yaotian has arrived!”

Zuiju abruptly stood up and exchanged a look with Pingting.

“So fast.”

Pingting sucked her lip and didn’t say anything. Several moments later she replied, “It was simply a matter of time. Better go welcome her.”

She then went out the door with Zuiju and saw that Yaotian’s maids had already paved the way for her. They quickly moved aside and bowed.

Yaotian had decided and immediately asked for Pingting’s location upon entering the Prince Consort Residence. She hadn’t said a word as she hurried over towards the garden, seeing Pingting in a deep bow in the distance. Her heart froze. Her footsteps slowed, studying the figure in the distance as she approached it. She then came to a calm stop in front of Pingting.

“Princess.” Pingting’s voice was gentle.

From a higher platform, she could only see Bai Pingting’s drooping neck, white and smooth.

Even though this woman was not beautiful, she was touching in another way.

Yaotian quietly watched her for a while, saying, “No need for excessive politeness. The Prince Consort told me to look after you when he left, so I have come to see you.” She said this while stepping into the room, her black eyes swirling around.

The room was well-furnished, and all of the equipped objects were all fine and polished. It did seem to befit for a mistress of a residence.

Yaotian chose a chair by the window, ordering, “You can have a seat.” She took the hot tea from Zuiju, her gaze falling on the guqin in the room as she took a sip.

Pingting and Zuiju knew that the main event was to come. Their expressions did not change except becoming more polite. Neither made a sound, obedient.

Yaotian saw enough of that qin before turning towards Pingting. A gentle expression came onto her face. “You were sick that day, so I left in a rush, only hearing songs without conversation. How have you been recently? Missing anything?”

“It’s all good.”

“Then...” Yaotian assessed Pingting’s expression, smiling. “Are you homesick?”

This question was a little strange; so was its tone. Zuiju’s heart thumped, revealing the colour of surprise.

Pingting also thought it was very strange. She knew that when He Xia left, Yaotian would let her live in the Royal Residence or some other place where He Xia couldn’t find her. As long as she was imprisoned anywhere else but the Prince Consort Residence, the guards would not know her strength and would relax their guard, meaning it would be much easier to escape. However, judging from Yaotian’s words, this was not the case.

A hundred thousand thoughts flashed through Pingting’s mind at that instant, but there was not a trace of them on her face. She softly replied, “Pingting is an orphan. What home?”

Yaotian was still smiling. “Then think of the Prince Consort Residence as your home, isn’t that a good idea?”

There seemed to be a hidden meaning in her words, as it certainly sounded suspicious.

Pingting heard this, her mind thinking up all sorts of impossible theories. She shook her head hard in disbelief and boldly laughed to Yaotian, meeting her gaze. The two people probed the other’s mind as sparks flew between them until they already knew what the other was thinking.

Yaotian had plans to make her leave.

How could that be?

But this was not a time for thinking. Time did not wait, and there was no second chance like this. Pingting gritted her teeth in secret and stood up from the chair before falling to her knees, without any explanation or warning. “Please decide for Pingting, Princess!”

Yaotian sat on the chair, lightly replying, “Decide what for you? Is the Prince Consort hurting you?”

“Master treats Pingting very well, but even though Master cherishes Pingting, he doesn’t know Pingting’s wish.”

“Your wish?”

“Pingting...has always wished to live freely, free from the troubles of the world.” Pingting looked upwards, her voice was sad. “The Prince Consort Residence has everything, but the tall, ornate tiled walls look like a huge cage to Pingting.”

Yaotian frowned, “You want to leave?”

“Yes, I beg Princess to fulfil my wish.”

“You are someone extremely cherished by the Prince Consort. How will I explain that I have freed you to the Prince Consort when he returns?”

“Princess and the Prince Consort are a family. With the love between husband and wife, what need is there for an explanation?” Pingting cleverly replied, “Master cherishes me, letting me stay at the Prince Consort Residence. Naturally Princess also cherishes me and has therefore released me. Both husband and wife is thinking the same and Princess has only approved of my release because of Master. How could Master possibly blame Princess? Princess, please fulfil Pingting’s wish.” She deeply bowed her head.

There was no trace of sound from above her head, but Pingting could feel Yaotian’s eyes fixed permanently on her back.

The fragrance of Gui Le in the room began to drift, gracefully whirling and dancing in the silent space above the people.

After a long pause, Yaotian’s voice finally appeared above her head. “We’re both women, so I won’t embarrass you even if you tell the truth. You still want to be with Chu Beijie, right? When you leave this place, you will go back to that man’s side, am I right?”

Pingting furiously shook her head, opening her eyes as she grinded her teeth. “Does Princess not know how Pingting ended up in Yun Chang? Is Pingting such a disgraceful woman who would shamelessly make her way back to that man?”

Yaotian was taken aback by her anger and hurriedly softened her voice. “Don’t be so agitated. I’m not suspecting you, it’s just that there’s something else that’s difficult to say. Get up first, we’ll continue talking afterwards.” She personally helped Pingting up, slowly saying, “Chu Beijie has assembled all the troops to attack my Yun Chang’s borders because of you. Will Chu Beijie really believe it if you leave? I’m afraid of him mistakenly thinking that we secretly executed you.”

“No need to worry Princess.” Pingting immediately replied, “Allow Pingting to write a letter and pass it onto Chu Beijie, so that he may know that I have already left.”

“That’s for the best.”

Undisguised joy appeared on her face, and she looked surprised. “So Princess is letting Pingting leave?”

Yaotian sighed. “What else can I do? The Prince Consort will be happy if you live well. Not to mention...how could I not choose the option that stops a great battle? When do you plan to go?”

“As soon as possible!” Zuiju heard the conversation of the two and was as excited as if the spring rain had suddenly come after a hundred years of drought. She couldn’t keep her excitement down any more and interrupted their conversation. Seeing the two’s gazes shift towards herself, she immediately lowered her head down immediately.

“She is Pingting’s maid, namely Zuiju.”

Yaotian studied Zuiju with her two eyes. “Say, why as soon as possible?”

Pingting’s heart began to skip ever few times. Of course the real reason wasn’t to be said but if she lied, it was unlikely to convince Yaotian’s eyes, a Princess who had dealt with national affairs before many officials. Yaotian’s question however, was clearly directed at Zuiju. The lie would be even more obvious if Pingting hurriedly interrupted.

If Zuiju couldn’t reply with a suitable reason, then Yaotian would become suspicious, causing the hope to immediately dissipate.

She couldn’t help look worriedly at Zuiju.

Zuiju stiffened at Yaotian’s words for a while. She then replied, without batting a lash, “Of course as soon as possible. The Prince Consort Residence is too stuffy, even buying rouge is troublesome. All maids of big residences have to go out some time. After all, there are all sorts of wonderful things on the market. Whether its tanghulu, crystalised sugar, rice nuggets, skill displays and the famous monkey displays, anyone but me can go. I had heard that Yun Chang has a stall that only sells watercolour paintings. The watercolour master would look at the expression on a girl’s face and use the brush in his hand to draw all sorts of designs that can’t be made with just flower petals and pollen. I bet it’s all very interesting. Even after getting to Yun Chang, I haven’t even gone out the big door once.”

This little speech came like crystal beads tapping as the fell into a jade bowl. It was said clearly and refreshingly, without any stuttering. Yaotian laughed at it, saying, “Silly girl.”

Pingting and Zuiju secretly sighed in relief.

Yaotian then asked Pingting, “What do you think?”

Pingting carefully replied, “It’s better if Princess decides.”

Yaotian studied Pingting for a while, a touch of grace flashing on her dignified face. After several moments of hesitation, she said, “Since it’s like that, then as soon as possible is fine. Write the letter and come with me to the carriage. I shall take you to the capital’s entrance.”

Zuiju hurriedly brought up a brush and ink.

Pingting walked to the table and placed clean paper before her. She dipped the brush in ink, raised her hand in midair when she suddenly stopped, sadness crossing her face. She didn’t lower her hand for a long time.

Zuiju knew what she was thinking and waited several breaths long until she could wait no longer. “Miss?” she asked, quietly.

Pingting slowly replied and bit her lip as she lowered her hands to write, not pausing at any time, until the paper was finished. She gracefully wrote her name in the corner and put down her brush.

Zuiju put away the brush and ink while Pingting carefully blew the letter dry and sealed it in an envelope. She added her signature on the top and handed it to Yaotian with both hands.

The letter had been written, as if putting an end to the Chu Beijie she knew.

The two had wanted to leave the Prince Consort Residence since their arrival and had long put thought into what they would bring. Not long later, Zuiju had already packed up their bags.

Yaotian waited for them to pack up properly and summoned a maid. "Prepare a carriage, I am leaving."

With one hand supporting Pingting, Zuiju held the baggage in her other hand.

On the way out of the backyard, all the guards in the atrium were deeply shocked when they saw Pingting's figure by Yaotian. He Xia was out on an expedition and had taken the many Jing-An Ducal residents with him, so most of the guards left behind at the Prince Consort Residence were Yun Chang's men. They knew that it was Yaotian, their country's Princess and knew not to offend her. Even a few of the bravest had taken a step forward to try to stop her anyway. How could they speak after seeing Yaotian's inviolable-looking eyes?

The Prince Consort Residence guards watched Yaotian bring Pingting out the door, when they suddenly heard a clear male voice urging, "Princess, please slow down!"

Dongzhuo hurriedly came forwards from inside, with a small team of guards. He straightened after bowing respectfully to Yaotian and eyed Pingting. "I wonder where Princess is taking Pingting?"

"City entrance."

"Why to the city entrance?"

Yaotian's expression was neutral. "Pingting wanted to go for a walk and I have approved."

"Does the Prince Consort know?"

"I will naturally tell the Prince Consort when he comes back." Yaotian replied, "Please move." As a Princess who had dabbled in national affairs, the power in her words were influential. Her cold words brought a chill.

"Princess, please forgive me! Dongzhuo has been ordered by the Prince Consort to guard the Prince Consort Residence. The outside is very dangerous so without the Prince Consort's protection, she musn't leave the residence."

Yaotian angrily replied, "And you dare defy my orders?"

Dongzhuo bowed three more times, but his voice hardened. "If Princess wants to take away Pingting, then please kill Dongzhuo first."

"How dare you!" Yaotian flew into a rage, challenging him to go further.

How daring could anyone act so rudely to Princess Yaotian in Yun Chang? Yaotian waved her sleeves and the guards that had come with her from the Royal Residence unsheathed their swords, gleaming with its cold light as it pointed towards Dong Zhuo and his group.

The atmosphere was very tense.

Dongzhuo still refused to move. He had received orders from He Xia and had been ordered to guard the Prince Consort Residence. No matter what, he couldn't let Yaotian take away Pingting. He raised his head to look at the sharp tips of the swords, articulating clearly his words. "If Princess wants to take away Pingting, then please kill Dongzhuo first."

Yaotian was furious, secretly shattering her teeth. However, Dongzhuo was one of the people He Xia had brought from the Jing-An Ducal Residence. Taking away Pingting had already taken a lot of effort, but if she were to kill one of his beloved men, how could she ever explain to him? She harrumped and coldly replied, "Even the Prince Consort doesn't speak so rudely to me. How mighty brave of you."

Dongzhuo wasn't afraid of Yaotian and was about to retort back until he heard Pingting's familiar soft voice that drilled into his ears. "Dongzhuo, do you really want to stop me?" Her voice was gentle and made his heart ache.

Because of various unspeakable reasons, ever since Pingting had fell into He Xia's hands, Dongzhuo had done everything to hide from her.

"Pingting, I..."

"Are you really that heartless?" Pingting's voice was soft. "Dongzhuo, look at me."

Dongzhuo lowered his head even further.

He was one of men from the Ducal Residence and had personally witnessed He Xia pushing Pingting to her limits out of jealousy, wrenching her away from Chu Beijie's side.

He Xia had imprisoned her at the Prince Consort Residence but elevated her status to a mistress. Dongzhuo had been both afraid and doubtful. If He Xia's jealousy towards Chu Beijie would not waver, then he may force Pingting to become his concubine. Knowing Pingting's pride and arrogance, perhaps she'd be completely crushed by this as a result.

How could former playmates go to such extent to harm each other?

Ever since the murder of the Duke and Duchess, he understood less and less of the Master he had grown up with.

"Dongzhuo, raise your head and look at me."

Dongzhuo turned away as if Pingting's gaze was fiery hot, burning until cracks appeared on his skin.

So painful that it didn't hurt any more.

Seeing no response from him, Pingting walked towards him, brushing away the sword points away. She held his hand.

The sudden touch, no matter how gentle, still sent a jolt through Dongzhuo's body.

"Do you still remember that night when you sent me off?" Pingting asked with a whisper.

Dongzhuo clenched his teeth, muffling out his words several moments later. "I do."

It had been after the King of Gui Le, He Su, had decided to execute the House of Jing-An, but Pingting had finally deceived Chu Beijie into a five-year truce of peace to Gui Le. It had been a great accomplishment but because of He Xia's suspicion, she was forced to leave.

In the endless darkness of the night, he had watched the lone figure on the horse off.

Pingting faintly sighed. "Why stay when I shouldn't?" She tightened her grip on Dongzhuo's hands, softening her voice. "My dear brother, send off your sister once more, okay?"

It seemed as if Dongzhuo had frozen stiff. He couldn't bear the expression on Pingting's face as she pleaded. Then, the silence yanked out the many thoughts and memories that had been pressed deeply into his heart.

These two soft hands that held his could play very nice-sounding qin yet had been swept into the war, bloodstained and no longer innocent.

Dongzhuo raised his head and looked into Pingting's eyes. He suddenly removed his hands from hers, turning away fiercely. He lowered his voice, "I didn't see anything."

Pingting was very saddened by this and watched him quietly. Zuiju had already begun to pull her by the wrist towards the door, overjoyed. "Hurry!" and then pushed her through it.

Yaotian really didn't want to form a bad impression on He Xia's people, so she was secretly overjoyed by this as she led the rest of her escorts to the outside of the Prince Consort Residence.

Once all were in their respective places, horse or carriage, they began to leave the Prince Consort Residence with a thunder.

"Here is some silver, please use it on the way." Yaotian's carriage had already been prepared with a bag of money and she ordered Zuiju to put it away carefully. She softly sighed and turned to Pingting, "A woman's life is just no good. If you really can explore the earth without a single care for the rest of the world, as free as a bird, then you are indeed stronger than me."

Pingting managed a smile. "With the Prince Consort with Princess, how could you not be stronger than Pingting?"

Yaotian did not know when she had been touched by her. She just sighed and didn't say another word.

The three remained silent in the huge, elaborately decorated carriage. They quietly listened to the sound of the rolling wheels.

Not long later, the carriage stopped and a person reported from outside the curtain. "Princess, we have arrived at the capital entrance."

Pingting and Zuiju came back to their senses, turning to Yaotian, slightly afraid that she would change her mind.

Yaotian softly replied, "You can leave."

Pingting and Zuiju both bowed towards her. "Thank you, Princess."

"I should be the one thanking you for your letter. With it, you have saved millions of sons of my Yun Chang." Yaotian seemed deeply tired as she waved her hand, saying, "Go. I wish you all the best with no more suffering."

Zuiju held the baggage with one hand, the other helping Pingting as she got off the carriage. The two stood at the city gates, watching the carriage disappear into the distance, slowly, like disappearing into the trance of a strange dream.

Zuiju lifted her head to look at the sun above her, before turning to the wide mud-caked roads outside the city gates. Her voice was full of disbelief as she whispered, "I can't believe she really let us go and even brought us to the city gates."

"It's because there are a lot of people at the city gates, meaning that there will be a lot of people willing to testify that Pingting walked out of the city at her own free will."

Zuiju temporarily paused before asking, "What is Miss saying?" Her mind was keener than most and had quickly considered the options. Her heart began to beat furiously as she directed her inquiring eyes towards Pingting.

Pingting seemed to have smelled something dangerous too. Her expression was light, "It is still too early, not the right time to leave the capital yet. Let's go see that Yun Chang market you mentioned back there."

For that tiny life in her belly, she would have to be more careful than anyone else.

Chapter 42

When Yaotian returned to the Royal Residence, Gui Changqing was already there waiting for her.

“Princess.” Seeing Yaotian, Gui Changqing got up to bow.

Yaoting softly replied and tiredly sat down on the chair. She raised her hands to rub her temples and waited for several moments before saying, “I tested Bai Pingting. From what I see, she really has no intention of returning to Chu Beijie’s side.”

“Then...what does Princess think?”

Yaotian considered it for a while and hesitantly replied, “A mere woman. If she isn’t a threat to us, then why harm her? The moment I mentioned that I could let her go, she was full of happiness. She clearly doesn’t want to stay beside the Prince Consort either.”

“Princess’ heart softened towards her.” Gui Changqing sighed.

“Senior Official,” Yaotian changed her tone, lowering it, “Does Senior Official not understand Yaotian’s troubles?”

Gui Changqing was silent.

This official of Yun Chang had always been uncompromisingly firm in his methods when dealing with matters that could affect Yun Chang’s future.

He got up, shifting his gaze away from Yaotian towards a distant tower he could not see clearly. He gradually said, “Aren’t Princess’ troubles supposed to be the troubles of Yun Chang? Princess has already acquired great power and it should be used to protect and bring mercy to many, not just a single Bai Pingting. It’s true, releasing Bai Pingting is not something difficult. However, I worry that if Princess is unable to deal with a small affair like Bai Pingting, not willing to go further simply because it’s troublesome, will Princess be able to properly deal with bigger affairs without bringing destruction to the entire Yun Chang?”

Yaotian was at a loss for words and remained silent.

Gui Changqing then continued, “War is very cruel, a predatory jungle, and is never the true path of life. Princess has a very important position, and many people will take advantage if Princess’ is not heartless enough. Just because Princess doesn’t want others to taste the bitter fruit of defeat, does this mean you will have it instead?”

Yaotian took every word to heart and remained silent for a long time. “Yaotian understands Senior Official’s intention.”

“Please consider it, Princess.”

Yaotian stayed silent for a while before sighing. “Sigh, go ahead, Senior Official.”

“Yes!”

“Senior Official ”

“Please speak, Princess...”

“You must keep it a secret and mustn’t let the Prince Consort know.”

“I will take care,” Gui Changqing departed, still in a bow.

The bead curtains shook at the movement, causing the jewels on it collide into each other, scattering the light coldly in all directions.

He Xia was on his way, his body full of dust as he speed towards the border.

If he knew that his most beloved maid had met with misfortune, how would he react?

Yaotian was fully worried as she thought carefully over and over again.

She dearly loved that man and clearly understood that if He Xia knew what she had done, she would never be forgiven.

Fate just played too many tricks on people.

Pingting, that woman called Pingting, was so clever yet simple.

Exploring the earth, without a single care for the rest of the world, as free as a bird.

If one could really explore the world the earth, without a single care for the rest of the world, truly as free as a bird, then how truly amazing it would be...

Because, even though Yun Chang was the most peaceful compared to the other three countries, she had been following the national policy that stayed with her through throughout life.

Although the clouds of battle now covered the head of this peaceful country, the markets in the capital had not yet been affected. Several carriages, horses and people strolled around the stalls that sold peanuts, soybean milk, rice dumplings as well as various displays, some with monkeys as they basked for money. Several maids curiously walked along the street, picking out rouge or watercolour paints and many seemed to have been ordered to buy a few for their residence’s ladies and madams.

Pingting and Zuiju picked the places with the most number of people. They took several alleyways as shortcuts, twisting and turning until not long later, they had reached another bustling street.

Zuiju followed closely behind her, holding the baggage. Her feet no longer enjoyed the touch of ground, “Miss, we have already been walking for a long time.”

“I’m trying to throw off the tail behind us.”

Zuiju was surprised, “There’s someone following us?”

“I’m just guessing. There’s too many people to know who exactly is.”

“Miss?”

A helpless expression formed on Pinotino’s face “I really don’t know ”

She had always been protected at the residences, protected by He Xia or Chu Beijie, and whether she was inside or outside. Even on the battlefield or advisory tent, guards had accompanied her. As a result, her encounters with enemies were uncommon.

If He Xia or Chu Beijie had been there, they would immediately notice who was the enemy, but Pingting didn't have this ability. Her naturally sharp senses indicated whenever there was danger, but all she could do was to hide as best she could.

The two quickened their pace when Pingting suddenly stopped and said, "I'm thirsty. Let's buy a bowl of soybean milk." She pulled Zuiju to a stall and put down two silver coins. "I'd like two bowls of soybean milk please, Mister."

When she took it over, her hand suddenly wobbled, causing half of the milk to spill.

"Kyaa!" Zuiju couldn't dodge in time and was drenched in it. Pingting was not spared either and a few drops spilled onto her sleeve.

"Oops," Pingting hurriedly put down the milk. "It's all my fault for being so clumsy, what to do now?" She worriedly looked around herself. Seeing a nice-looking matron looking their way from her residence, she hurriedly pulled Zuiju towards the entrance of the door, looking very innocent. "Matron, is it possible to borrow clothes from this place?"

Their own clothes were prettily made and they had treated her with respect, suggesting that they were daughters of a good family. With the carefree honesty unique to all Yun Chang people, the matron quickly replied, "Why not? Come in, Miss. How could you walk around the streets like this?"

She opened the door and led them inside.

The matron looked at Zuiju who looked like she had been soaked in soup for hours. She chuckled, "Soybean milk is full of sugar and will be sticky when dry. Miss can take it off and I will wash it."

Pingting also said, "Mother will definitely yell at me for ruining my own clothes when I get back. Please, Matron, give me some water so I may wash may them myself."

"Oh my, don't wash them yourself. You are a guest from the moment you enter. How could we possibly allow our guests to wash their own clothes?"

The matron was very kind-hearted and found two sets of old clothing for them. "Please change into them, Miss. These are my daughter-in-law's, and her figure is about the same as yours. It's not made from fine materials like yours, but at least it's clean."

This was exactly what Pingting wanted. She immediately thanked her and hurriedly changed into them with Zuiju. She then lowered her voice to Zuiju, "Give me a silver coin from your back."

Zuiju replied.

After getting into the clothes, the matron took the clothes that the two had changed out of. "I'll go wash them first, and will be back soon. This material must be very expensive, oh my, very expensive."

The moment the matron's back had disappeared out the door, Pingting hurriedly tug at Zuiju. "Let's go." She put down the silver coin onto the table and was about to go, when she hesitated for a moment. She tore off the blue tablecloth and continued to push Zuiju.

Zuiju hurriedly replied "Miss, that is the rear side."

“Of course we can’t go out the main door. If there really is someone following us, then they’re waiting outside now.” Pingting had chosen to approach the matron only after seeing the residence was big, meaning there was more chance of ordinary people and if the backyard was big enough, then there should be a small side exit.

“Look!” There was a little bit of glee deep inside Pingting’s voice. “There’s a door as expected.”

The two crept out of the side door, ending up in a quiet back alley. Pingting messed up Zuiju’s hair, “Tie two pigtails.” She then put down her own hair and managed to tie it up in a very, very ordinary hairstyle. Not long later, it seemed that two had become completely different people. Pingting then unfolded the cloth she had stolen, wrapping up the outside of the bag. “Now they can’t identify us by our bags too.”

The two exchanged a smile at this before carefully walking out of the alley. Their steps were slow as if two close sisters were shopping around town.

“Can we go out of the city now?” Zuiju whispered.

“No.” Pingting’s gaze drifted towards a raised plaque in the distance. She grinned, “Off to the hotel.” When the opponent noticed that she had escaped, they would definitely go to the city gates first. Since that was the case, why not stay for two days and wait until their pursuers were faraway.

Zuiju understood this, secretly praising Pingting’s intelligence. She nodded, “Then let’s go.”

“You go first.” Pingting chuckled while saying. “You go first, I’ll follow. Order a separate room each, so we’re not related at all. Give me a few more coins from your bag.”

Zuiju saw that her spirits had significantly risen, with the energy of a bird freed from its cage. She couldn’t help smile sweetly as she handed the coins to her, replying, “Understood. So we’re not related at all. I will go now, but when will you arrive?”

“Not too close. I will come in the evening.”

Zuiju started to worry. “Miss, why don’t you go first and let me stay on the streets...”

“Don’t argue.” Pingting sucked her lip and smiled. “The capital is now a battlefield. I am the main advisor, so don’t argue with me, you mere little soldier.” She pushed Zuiju by the shoulder, “Go.”

Zuiju followed Pingting’s commands and asked for a room at the hotel. Although the room was small, it was tidy. Zuiju paced around, studying every nook and cranny and did not find any fault that would make her worry. She relaxed and sat in the room by herself, waiting for Pingting.

The silence was lonely and the best torture to human minds. Since leaving Dong Lin, she had never left Pingting’s side. She only had to wait for a while before beginning to worry. Pingting was the primary target, and her body’s condition significantly restricted her actions. What if... the silence made her think about all sorts of nasty thoughts as she sat down. Zuiju regretted it. She shouldn’t have listened to Pingting and entered the hotel first. Her heart and mind seemed to have several ants crawling in them. The more she thought, the more scared she became. Zuiju stood up, wanting to immediately find Pingting. She burst out of the room but then stepped back.

What if she went and Pingting returned but couldn’t find her? After thinking, it seemed this and that couldn’t work. She swallowed back her fears and continued to wait.

Time seemed to pass very slowly. Each minute and second was painfully endured, each tearing at Zuiju's being. She finally saw that it was evening, yet Pingting hadn't arrived, causing her to be extremely agitated. She turned in circles around the room.

Damn it, damn it. I shouldn't have listened to Miss Bai.

Night was beginning to fall. The sitting and waiting increased Zuiju's anxiety as the moments continued to pass.

Knock. Knock.

The sound of knocking started to sound. Zuiju jolted back in shock. She clenched her fists but placed a calm expression on her face as she walked towards the door.

"Who are you looking for?"

There was a man carrying luggage at the door. He was tall and thin, most of his face obscured by a large bamboo hat, only revealing a dark-coloured chin.

"Ah..." A soft laugh came from under the huge bamboo hat.

Zuiju's expression changed, hurriedly pulling that person into the room. She carefully closed the door and clenched her teeth. "You scared me to death, Miss! Where did you go? Why did you only come now?" She sighed in relief.

"I've heard about disguising as men before and finally learned it today." Pingting took off the bamboo hat, the black and white of her eyes starkly contrasting to her dark-coloured complexion. They looked like two brightly coloured gems. Something unknown had been placed in her clothes, making her shoulders seem a lot broader but also making her figure seem even thinner. Pingting pulled off her height-increasing shoes and rubbed her small red feet on the bed. "There wasn't enough time, so I only changed my makeup. I am so tired, need a rest." She then fell back onto the bed.

"Didn't you say to order one room each so we wouldn't be related?" Zuiju reminded her. "Be careful not to let others suspect us." She then frowned, before asking, "Why is your voice so hoarse? Got a cold? Would you like some medicine?"

"I changed my voice with herbs. Otherwise how could I speak like a man?" Pingting thought of something funny, and began to chuckle amusedly, "When I got to this hotel, I described you to the bellboy, saying that you were my wife who left home after a fight. He then brought me here."

Zuiju was not satisfied. "Won't people laugh at me tomorrow when we go out?" But she couldn't help laughing out as well. She undid the bag Pingting brought back with her. "What's this? Ah!" She quickly retracted her hand.

"Be careful, it's very sharp." Pingting hurriedly got off the bed and came towards her. "Let me see. Are you hurt badly?"

"No, I was luckily quick enough." Zuiju held out her hand to let her see, a new red mark on her finger. "What did you get this for?"

"For self-protection as we travel. It'll be much easier to use after assembling them carefully." Pingting had put in a few knives and daggers as well as several strange objects Zuiju had no idea about. She took them out and placed them on the table. Pingting then said, "There are still a few other parts left. Because the manufacturer was busy, I paid double and will collect them tomorrow morning." She then took out a brush and ink, writing the names of several herbs. She handed it to Zuiju, "Take these to the pharmacy tomorrow and buy them."

Zuiju looked at them, curiously asking, “These herbs don’t agree or match with each other and is without central effect, therefore they are never used together. What does Miss need them for? Do you feel uncomfortable?”

“Don’t worry, it’s not for me.”

After being convinced, Zuiju took over the prescription. She carefully warned, “I know that you have good knowledge of medicine, but if it’s for yourself, then my prescriptions are still better.”

“Understood.”

Pingting had brought some hot buns from the streets. The two didn’t leave the room. They ate inside before heading to the bed to sleep.

The bed of the hotel was very hard, but shockingly Pingting laid down with an extremely pleasant look. She sighed and said, “How comfortable...”

“Have some blankets so you won’t be cold.” Zuiju quietly asked, “I don’t think I can squeeze in. The bed is too small.”

“A squeeze is better; it’s warmer.” Pingting grabbed Zuiju’s hands under the blanket, softening her voice. “It’s so nice that my child won’t be born in the midst of the various schemes. I want him to be born in the mountains and the forests, a place where clean springs run while birds fly overhead.”

“Build a little cabin, cook some food at the back and buy an old qin,” Zuiju continued.

Pingting began to laugh. “Sounds right.” The two people then silently thought about a life in the mountains and forest, immersed in the beauty of the night. Pingting then asked, “Are you not going to return to your Teacher?”

“How could I not return? After so long, I really do miss Teacher.” Zuiju’s voice was faraway, “When Teacher sees me, he will definitely yell at me.”

“Zuiju, let’s make a promise.”

“Hm?” Zuiju turned, receiving Pingting’s serious eyes. Something suddenly came into mind, bursting into her mouth. “I will never tell anyone about your whereabouts, especially the Duke.” She then made the oath the way people of Dong Lin did.

Pingting nodded and sighed in relief.

The two then managed to sleep.

Under the same moon, Chu Beijie was unable to sleep that night.

Other than the cold wind of the plains whirling around Chu Beijie’s ear, it was silent. He had his sword unsheathed, dancing to its cold light.

A sword was power.

He had once defeated the Bei Mo army on the battlefield in just three commands, shattering the entire morale of the Bei Mo army.

When heroes had swords their spirits lifted

As long as they had a sword in hand, they should be without fear, surging ahead without looking back.

He knew the sword in his hand was filled with power, enough to shake all of the earth's strong mountains. After all, how many generals were out there who dared to challenge Chu Beijie?

In the depths his eyes, the lights of the army tents were imprinted onto them. The sleeping soldiers inside them never once suspected that their advisor would lose.

Chu Beijie was someone who could not fail. With him leading them, it was one victory followed by another.

Under the moon, Chu Beijie calmly waved around his sword as he danced. His body was like a dragon, flying around in the night sky of the plains.

His sword techniques were sharp, but his heart was soft.

Not only in a mess, it was also in pain.

The wrenched pain in his heart grew deep until living was more painful than death.

But the more painful his heart, the more he had to endure it. The sword seemed even harsher in response.

In the vast depths of the darkness, the dim lights emitted the slightest haze. They wrapped around his distraught figure as if softly smiling at him.

Every second, every minute, he grew increased understanding of the sorrow Pingting felt as she parted. Yet it was something he could never understand the full extent of, the despair and helplessness that came with it. His skills in swords were unparalleled, and his horse was the best in the world, yet the purest love he had for the most important woman of his life was slowly dissipating.

All those moments before the flowers and the moon had been about the other. Now that he thought about it, those memories should have been unforgettable, yet he had shattered them all without reserve. Why did he realise now that Pingting spent so much effort, despite her uneasiness, to desperately entrust herself to him?

"If you live, I live. If you die, I can only accompany you to death."

"Please let Pingting follow Duke to the ends of the earth. My honour is decided by Duke and my death decided by Duke."

The promise stood, not one word a lie.

Every word was heartfelt, and every word were her tears of blood.

After Luoshan's report, he had gone to the secluded residence, uncovering a pot of pickled plum blossoms in the courtyard where Pingting lived in. When he'd opened it, the soft fragrance flooded into his nose. He seemed to be able to see the scene of Pingting picking the flowers. That scene in his mind was beautiful, a picture of paradise.

She was carrying his flesh and blood.

The flesh and blood of Chu Beijie and Bai Pingting tied, moulded together. That tiny life was hidden in her belly.

He wanted to put his palm on that little belly, gently stroking it. He wanted to place his ears by it, listening to the movement of his own flesh and blood

This desire was tangled up in his heart, causing a hammering pain. Chu Beijie gripped tightly onto his precious sword, thrusting it fiercely into the wind. It flew freely out of his hands.

Little did he know that the person he wanted to save had already set off on a long journey. That journey was both long and dangerous, ending at the edge of the world.

They were ready to leave by the third day. The wife that had left home after a quarrel was finally flattered enough to go home by her tall and skinny husband. The two excused themselves at the reception. To make the wife happy, the husband appeared to have spent all day buying all sorts of good things for her. When they arrived, all they had were two small bags. Those two had become a huge bag each by the time they left.

“Be careful, Guests. Next time you come back to the capital, make sure to return to our hotel!” The bellboy yelled to send them off.

The taciturn husband didn’t say anything, but Zuiju beamed at him.

They got out from the city gates peacefully, walking northeast.

“We still need to buy two horses,” said Zuiju.

“It’s too noticeable to buy horses in the capital.” Pingting took out a rough map she bought from a wandering merchant a few days ago. She looked at it closely for a while. “It seems there is a small town fifteen miles away. It won’t be too late to buy a horse after a night’s rest.”

The two delicate girls walked together, carrying their bags on their backs. Their pace wasn’t slow. They barely managed fifteen miles when the signs of night began to fall, but the little town marked on the map was nowhere to be seen.

“Why are we still not there?”

Pingting frowned. “This map isn’t as refined as the maps the army uses, so the distance and directions should only be approximate. I reckon the little town is still ahead, at most two more miles.”

The cold wind from the mountains seemed to leak through the cracks of the rocks, bringing back numerous horrible-sounding echoes. Zuiju looked around at her surroundings. The trees were gray in the dim light, seeming to hide ghosts, monsters or beasts that would jump out at any time. She shuddered and said, “Miss, this is such a gloomy path, yet we still have to walk two more miles?”

“What else can we do apart from walk? Stay in this dark forest of the mountain for a night perhaps?”

The two gritted their teeth and continued on. The slope on the mountain continued upwards, making each passing minute of walking more tiring. They walked on the twisting mountain road for half an hour, puffing when night had fallen. The moon had risen behind them, casting looming shadows of the trees onto the ground. They seemed to emphasise the eeriness of the forest.

“It’s almost too dark to see the road,” Zuiju said, “It’s about time to light the lamp.” She opened the bag, taking out the matches and a small oil lamp. She held the lamp with one hand and was about to light it with the other when Pingting stopped her.

“Be quiet!” Pingting’s voice had a sense of urgency as if anxious after detecting danger.

Zuiju suddenly stopped her movement, following the direction of Pingting's gaze.

The faint flickering of a fire was filtered through the forest in the southeast direction.

"Other travellers." When Zuiju saw them, she returned the matches and the lamp back into the bags. "I wonder what they're doing."

Pingting's bright eyes stared at the lights that seemed weak due to being shrouded by the forest. She lowered her voice, "This is a road that must be crossed when going from the capital to the Bei Mo borders."

The people who meant her harm clearly knew that Yun Chang, Dong Lin and Gui Le were not places where she could stay. The only possible place she could live was in Bei Mo.

If her traces had been lost at the capital, where else was a better place to ambush her than this road in the mountains?

The night was heavy.

"We must leave!" Zuiju urgently whispered back.

"This is an obstacle that must be dealt with sooner or later." Pingting slowly shook her head, a faint confidence in her lips. "Come with me."

The two quietly crept deeper into the forest. They crossed the lush forest between them until they were near to the many flickers of light they had seen on the mountainous road.

"That wench! How long do we still have'ta wait?"

Hearing their voices, Pingting and Zuiju instinctly lowered themselves, hiding in the bushes.

There were a few men lying and sitting around a campfire. Two or three jugs of alcohol and a few polished swords laid messily on the ground.

"Bandits?" Zuiju whispered softly in Pingting's ear.

Pingting gracefully raised an eyebrow, "Not necessarily."

The crisp sound of a foot snapping a twig suddenly came, causing the two to jump back in fright. They were too afraid to continue talking but continued to peep.

"Yah. Just how long do we 'ave to guard this damned road?"

The man who had his head tilted back exposed his throat to the jug of wine, appearing to be the boss of these people. He muttered, "Cut the crap. If we're to wait, then wait!"

"But we've 'been waiting 'ere every day. When are those two little wenches coming?" Said a scruffy-looking man with the face of a rat as he guarded the campfire.

Two little wenches?

Pingting and Zuiju's hearts thumped in understanding. They exchanged each other a look.

Another man sneezed and sat up. "I reckon, izza day away from capital to 'ere. No movement a'tall in the last three days. Betcha they haven't gone on this road so our waiting is pointless."

“I told you to cut the crap and patiently wait on!” The boss angrily threw away the empty jug. “Those bastards, useless tailing pieces of crap. How could they lose two little whores in the capital? We’re the doomed ones, eating the north wind ‘ere without a life. The Senior Official said this was a road that must be crossed when going from the capital to the Bei Mo borders and this was a task of utmost importance. If we can’t complete it, we’ll be eating da cold wind forever.”

The man at the campfire lamented at the injustice. “Everyone says that little Bai slut is very cunning. Who knows what road she’d take?”

Zuiju couldn’t move at all and tightly clutched onto Pingting’s hand under the cover of the bushes.

“Not to worry. Sooner or later she will hit one of our people. The roads that must be crossed when heading to Dong Lin and Gui Le also have people waiting to ambush.”

“Hehe...” The ratty-looking man’s voice was sharp and high-pitched, very nasty sounding. “Though I do wish those two little sluts come ‘ere. ‘eard that Chu Beijie was driven crazy with lust for one of those whores. Even the Prince Consort thinks of her as a treasure. Betcha it’s ‘cos her skill in bed is amazing, good to die for.”

The men all spluttered in evil laughter.

“True, I hope they come onto this road too and see whether she can make us feel so good to die, or we’re the ones to make her feel so good to die.”

“Haha, we’d better prepare a good line up so no feelings are hurt aye.”

Their boss coldly warned them. “You can play with ‘er however you like but don’t kill ‘er. If she’s dead, go see the Senior Official with your heads looped off.”

Pingting had always been spoiled by the Duke and Duchess in her youth. Even when she escaped or imprisoned, she had always been treated with respect. Listening to the group’s foul language made her tremble with anger.

Zuiju could see Pingting was angry and gave her a look, beckoning for them to retreat.

But Pingting didn’t move at all, her gaze fixed on the flames of fire.

That group of people energetically chattered away for a long time. Someone headed towards the forest when the firewood had already finished burning. Pingting and Zuiju didn’t move at all. Their hearts threatened to jump out of their chests when they heard snapping twigs about ten feet away. It was dark in the forests but the bushes were dulled yellow. Thankfully it was densely packed. Pingting and Zuiju’s clothing as well as the cloth on the bag were dark coloured, blending into the darkness of the night. That person walked around once, collecting a pile of branches and threw the pieces of wood one after the other into the fire.

The wood burned in the fire, producing the crisp crackling sounds.

“Time to swap shifts.” The boss got up, looking particularly tall and burly. He kicked the sleeping man beside him, “You three, go guard the checkpoint ahead. Qi-boy, take the lookout post above. Nanfeng and you, go check the traps.”

“I’ll go now. Hehe, maybe the sluts are already in the traps, waiting to meet us!”

Another peal of laughter.

Qi-boy had just stood up, turning around to put out the fire. There was still a huge piece of something red behind them, appearing to be unroasted meat. Because of the coldness of the snow, raw meat could be stored for many days outside.

He whipped out a sharp knife and sliced a piece of frozen meat off. "Let's go."

Pingting realised they would pass through the bushes, meaning they were likely to discover their presence. She pulled Zuiju's hand and retreated without a word or sound.

The two found a place where the moonlight did not reach, squeezing behind several large boulders. Zuiju thought if it hadn't been for Pingting's sense of danger and if she lit the lamp, they would have met the enemies, resulting in torture worse than death. Her slightly heavier breathing had not yet relaxed when she whispered, "I never imagined Yaotian would be so heartless. Miss, what shall we do?"

Pingting also lowered her voice. "There is an ambush ahead, not to mention a lookout ahead and traps in the forest." She thought for a long time and opened her own bag. She took out a small box. "Spread this over your hands, feet and face."

Zuiju couldn't see what the little box contained in the moonlight, so she sniffed at it, realising what it was. These were the herbs Pingting had asked her to buy. Pingting had grinded it all into a powder and combined them with a strange oily substance. The bizzare paste that formed as a result was now placed in the little box.

Pingting herself also spread a lot on her own face and limbs. She explained, "This is to avoid hunting dogs."

"How does Miss know they have hunting dogs?"

"That man sliced off a large piece of meat before leaving. It's definitely for a hunting dog." Pingting returned the box after they had spread enough of the paste. She took out several more objects from the bag and arranged them on the floor.

The moonlight did not reach them, therefore Zuiju had no idea what she was fiddling with. In just three days in the capital, Pingting had spent eighty or ninety percent of the money Yaotian had given them, producing all sorts of odd things that Zuiju had no inkling of their purpose or origins. "Miss, why don't we head back to the capital and slowly lengthen the time? We'll go back the way we came and find somewhere to hide. It won't be too late to head to Bei Mo after they've disbanded."

"The sooner we get to Bei Mo, the safer we'll be. If we waste too much time, He Xia may quickly be aware of my escape and will send orders to capture me at all costs." In the darkness, Pingting's eyes flashed with pride like the piercing light of obsidian. Her voice turned cold, "Besides, how could I let go of such a rude group?"

Zuiju knew that Pingting was furious and secretly lamented.

This person had strategized on equal terms with Chu Beijie and He Xia. When it was down to the cut and the thrust, a fight that settled everything, she was no match for even a beginner practitioner of the sword arts.

How could she not "let go" of them?

"Now is not the time to hold grudges. They're all men and armed."

Pingting's soft smile came through the darkness. "Don't be afraid. Those boars are nothing to me, as long as I have these in hand." She picked a few items off the ground and handed them to Zuiju. She placed her own bag back on her back. In a quiet voice she said, "Come with me."

The two people slowly crept through the forest. Pingting stopped every few moments before continuing, occasionally listening or carefully sniffing to find the right direction. Not long later, they finally found a small spring. The two continued to walk upstream and soon found its end. The spring's water trickled between the rocks, causing a gurgling sound of water. Indeed, it was the source.

In the darkness of the night, Pingting had some trouble assessing the shape of the mountains and forests around them. She turned to Zuiju, instructing, "Their campsite fire is clearly visible from here, suggesting that the lookout and checkpoints of the group are not far from there. To prevent us from moving in the forests, they have definitely set a large number of traps in them. It seems the group are divided into two, for maximum supervision. If we try to pass, there is no way they won't be alerted."

"We mustn't alert them. They have too many people. If they surround us, how could we possibly leave?"

Pingting sat down beside the mouth of the spring. She dipped a hand into it, bending the running water. She sat there for a while and her words were thoughtful, "On the contrary, we want to alert them."

"Miss?"

Pingting took the objects from Zuiju's hands. "These trees here are perfect." She began to assemble the objects one by one. Zuiju had some clue of what she was trying to do not long later.

"It becomes a crossbow after assembling?"

"Although it is indeed a crossbow, it isn't a normal one." Pingting took out a leather strap and skilfully manoeuvred it onto the tree. She then brought the leather strap towards the edge of the mouth of the spring, successfully setting up device. "When they step on this, it fires."

After the first had been set, she started on the second. She secured them with a leather strap and hid it in the dense trees or bushes, taking extra care to hide the strap.

She was busy for a long time, fitting seven such crossbows. Each was set deeper in the forest than the last. Zuiju studied them and realised they did not fire at the same time. Pingting used the leather straps to connect them.

"When the first round fires, then the second is freed. When the second round finishes firing, the third is freed and so on..." After Pingting finished, she and Zuiju returned to where the device was first set up. She stood by the mouth of the river, raising a hand to point at the distant crossbows hidden in the darkness. "The forest is very dark so they will definitely not realise that there are crossbows hidden in the trees. They would only know what really happened when morning arrives."

Zuiju gathered all of her concentration together, under the cover of darkness. Suddenly, everything clicked. "When they step on the device, the first round will be shot, making them think that we're on the other side of the stream. After the first round fires, the second round will begin from a further point, making them think that we have retreated deeper into the forest. Gradually, they will be drawn far away from this place."

Pingting replied, "Although there are a large number of arrows, they are done automatically, so they won't be very accurate or cause a lot of harm. The real harmful thing is still here." She slowly pointed to it.

"The mouth of the spring?"

"As it's the source, then all the water flows throughout the entire spring. When they cross the spring to hurry to the other side, they will cause large splashes."

“Miss means to...” Zuiju saw that Pingting’s pearly white palm held a few herbs rolled up into tight balls and her voice was confused, “poison them?”

“Correct. We’ll place it in the spring. It’ll slowly dissolve in the water, staying for a day or two.”

Zuiju nodded in praise, suddenly remembering the most important question. “But why would they come here and step on the device?”

Pingting’s face revealed a profoundly confident smile. “Do they not have hunting dogs?”

Zuiju saw her smile and abruptly began to sympathise those hateful men.

This Miss Bai who could shake the four countries had enough of feeling helpless. After hearing some very insulting words tonight, she was filled to the brim with anger. She was planning to vent all of it out on this unlucky group.

Who else dared mess with the Bai Pingting who even Chu Beijie and He Xia were afraid to mess with?

Chapter 43

When it was about three, the nearly asleep Nanfeng was jolted awake by an unusual alarm.

“Who’s there?” Nanfeng yelled loudly as he suddenly jumped out of the bushes.

Could it be that woman named Bai?

He pushed open the branches to reveal the trap that was set earlier. The trap had showed signs of tamper, as if someone had indeed fallen unsuspectingly into it, yet no one was captured in it. There was something shining in the darkness which Nanfeng picked up and studied. It was a beautifully embroidered shoe.

“Gao-boy! Look!”

Nanfeng yelled and Gao-boy wriggled out of a tree. “Sup? A moun’in puppy?”

“A woman! Look, a shoe!”

On the side of the embroidered shoes, a few, tiny stitched words could be seen in the darkness – produced by the Prince Consort Residence.

“It’s from the Prince Consort Residence.”

“It must be from that Bai woman!” Nanfeng was delighted, “She must’ve just passed and almost got caught in the trap. That whore.”

The men at the checkpoint were also alerted by their loud yells. “Nanfeng, what’s wrong?”

“Boss, that Bai woman is in this forest. Got ‘er shoe.”

All of their impatience, laziness and exhaustion completely evaporated in a single moment upon discovering of the embroidered shoes. Everyone started to get excited, “Hehe, now they’re in the forest. They can’t escape.”

Two dogs about half the height of men were brought over. They sniffed the embroidered shoes and immediately moved restlessly about, almost snapping the collars on their necks.

The boss freed the dogs. “Go!”

The dogs were released and furiously dashed deeper into the forest.

The night wind was freezing, but everyone’s excitement had flared right up.

“Heh, go, ma bros!”

“No, let da boss go first!”

“Get da two little sluts!”

The sword came out of their scabbards, their cold reflections of light flashing. Huge shadows spilled into the forest, chasing after the agile figures of their hunting dogs.

“Surround ‘em!”

“Don’t let ‘em get away!”

They sweated hard as they chased to the mouth of the spring. The dogs that had been barking all the way suddenly dipped their heads into the water, drinking in large, furious gulps.

“Continue chasing! Why are they drinking water at this kind of time?” The dogs were kicked until they howled in pain, but they refused to leave the mouth of the spring.

They couldn’t help it. Pingting had purposely left a special herbal powder in the shoe. Those who sniffed the substance would have their noses inflamed, making them feel like their insides were burning. This made them wildly search for the closest water source near them.

When the rest of the group had arrived at the river, they too saw the two hunting dogs drinking water furiously. They were completely taken aback, “Where are they? Why aren’t we chasing?” They happened to trod on the rock that Pingting had set as the device trigger. Their words had not yet fully dawned when the first round began to fly with the wind towards them.

“Ah!” An arrow lodged itself into Qi-boy’s shoulder. He screamed in shock.

“Sneak attack! Bastards, those whores have crossbows!” The crowd of people were furious. They bent down to cover themselves when the arrows paused.

A few raised their heads and heard another gust of wind.

“Careful!”

In the darkness, they did not know how many arrows were flying. They thought swords were enough to capture the two women, Pingting and Zuiju, who didn’t have bows with them and therefore didn’t have the ability of long distance combat. They began to yell angrily.

“The sluts are firing more arrows!”

“When we capture ‘er, we ‘av to make their life worse than death!”

But these arrows did not go very far and began to drop before reaching the spring. The boss was more experienced and muttered, “They’re shooting while retreating. Chase ‘em!”

The thousand men trampled across the stream, armed with their knives and swords. They splashed everywhere as they crossed the stream. They barely arrived on the other side when the third round of arrows began even further away.

“Chase ‘em quick!”

“Sons of a donkey, so fast!”

The crowd scattered in all directions to surround their target, camouflaging themselves and their weapons in the forest. The arrows did not stop. They point in the direction where they ran, but the accuracy had greatly decreased. Apart from the arrow that had pierced into the unprepared Qi-boy, no one else was hurt. The agitated men angrily dashed. The more they dashed, the angrier they became. They thought of ways to punish those insolent women when they were caught.

After the seventh round of arrows, there was no longer any movement.

Nanfeng smirked evilly. “Hehe, they’ve run out of arrows. Bros, take ‘em on!”

All of their hearts settled for a moment before they felt a wave of excitement. They had been stationed here for a long time and were already familiar with the terrain. Where else could those two women go now that the path before them was a dead end? They began to close their circle when an unusual expression leaked onto Nanfeng’s gleeful face. “My foot...” A tingling feeling began to run up his leg. His iron sword crashed into the stone as he held his foot. His expression was twisted. “It tickles, tickles, aaaah!” He inserted his hand into his boots. It was as painful as if a layer of skin had been forcefully peeled off. He screamed.

The boss furiously roared, “Why’re ya pretendin’ to be a monkey, Nanfeng? Ah...” He suddenly felt the same strange sensation on his own foot.

At first it was just a mild itch, but soon it became a pain difficult to suppress.

All of the others fell to the ground one by one, screaming as they clutched onto their feet.

“Ow...ah...those sluts...’urts! Those sluts put poison!”

Conversation was stuttered through the beast-like screams and the hideously twisted expressions.

The boss trembled in pain. He still wanted to itch that place, but it was far too painful. He gritted his teeth, “Who’s protecting the checkpoint?”

“All...all of us bros came to ‘elp o...wh...damn, it hurts...who guarded the checkpoint?” Qi-boy was the most unfortunate of them all. His foot had been poisoned in addition to the light injury on his shoulder. His nails had clawed long lines of blood. Enduring such pain was a tough battle in its own way.

“Damn it, we got played!”

The sky’s colour was to brighten soon; its gray light appeared to be the sky’s brows, lifting into a smirk of ridicule.

No wonder the Senior Official had warned them so many times to not underestimate that woman named Bai.

Damn it!

Chapter 44

A splendidly decorated carriage, surrounded by guards, was on the road from the Yun Chang capital city to the borders. Messengers frequently entered the group to pass on news to the person inside the carriage.

Two of them were very bad.

The reports from the Senior Official Gui Changqing were an endless flow, one letter after the next. One of them had been Bai Pingting's disappearance from the capital and the second was about a string of people sent in the mountains who—for some bizarre reason—all caught rather baffling kinds of illnesses. Gui Changqing had employed almost all of his undercover workers to set all sorts of traps on the way from the capital to Bei Mo, but each and every one of them showed no result.

Bai Pingting and her maid passed each obstacle, not leaving any evidence behind. The dragonhead showed its movement but the body and tail had completely disappeared. The most recent letter suggested that they had finally been spotted. Originally they should've been quickly caught, but they had put in some weird medicine that drained all energy from the soldier's limbs. The men could only sit back and watch the two women slip away.

"That Bai Pingting." Yaotian read Gui Changqing's letter and went closer to the fireplace, watching its contents gradually turn to ash. She lowered her voice, "When will they be exposed?"

"Replying to Princess, everyone has been severely warned by the Senior Official. They are to play as bandits and never to leak out any word in front of Pingting." The messenger knelt down before Yaotian. "She shouldn't know they're our people."

"Difficult to say." Yaotian sighed faintly. "Even if she did, what could she do? She isn't harmed at all, nor does she have evidence. No one will believe her even if she says so. Oh well, go tell the Senior Official not to waste more effort on Bai Pingting. We have failed too many times. The skies do not approve of our actions either. Why force her to her wits' end now that they are already far away?"

The messenger respectfully replied, "I have remembered Princess' words and shall duly pass them onto the Senior Official."

"You can go."

Seeing that the messenger had disappeared beyond the curtain, Yaotian was left behind in the huge carriage. She sighed softly. The ornaments that dazzled brilliantly in the sunlight had been her favourite kind and been placed inside the carriage, evoking a dreamy atmosphere in that space. Yaotian, however, displayed no interest in them.

There were more bad news waiting for her.

After receiving Bai Pingting's letter, she had given it to a messenger to give to Gui Changqing. Yaotian had then ordered everyone to forget the various customs and rituals of a Princess before leaving the capital and urgently headed towards the borders. Rather than thinking of the innocent lives being wasted in the battle, the showdown of the better general between Chu Beiji and the Prince Consort was more important

While Yaotian was still on the road, the two armies had already confronted each other.

The first confrontation was on the Yang Plains. Chu Beijie had forced back He Xia by twenty miles, resulting in many casualties amongst the Yun Chang army.

The second confrontation started on the Yang Plains. Its center had shifted to the east. As expected of a famous general like He Xia, he knew Chu Beijie was in a hurry to push forwards and cleverly avoided a direct clash, focusing his attacks on the right flank. They lured them to the dark forests. If Chu Beijie hadn't quickly uncovered his plan and sent a fast messenger to retreat, the right flank of the Dong Lin army would have long been annihilated. This forced Chu Beijie to be more vigilant. The Dong Lin army did not attack without plans from thereon.

Yaotian was hurrying day and night, hoping to stop the battle. She received reports of casualties on her way. Not only that, Yun Chang's dark forests were teeming with human life as it was the place where many peasants lived in. Just one flaming torch was enough to threaten their peaceful existence.

Yun Chang could not afford to unnecessarily sacrifice the lives of peasants. She had to arrive as soon as possible. Chu Beijie was stationed on Bianfeng Foothill while He Xia's troops were on Jiu Cliffs. Once the formal war had begun, the consequences would be disastrous beyond measure.

He Xia briefly explained the situation on the battlefield. His words were formed with vigour and confidence. Most of the hundreds of words in the army report were amorous greetings directed at herself. His generals were a lot more detailed and vividly described the brutal events that occurred—

“Chu Beijie's main troop is elite, well-trained, and nimble like the wind. From the battle of Yang Plains, it is obvious they are the essence of Dong Lin's army.”

“The lights of swords bounced everywhere and screams shook the sky. The corpses attracted numerous vultures. My Yun Chang's cavalry troop charged towards Chu Beijie from the front, and there are almost no survivors left behind.”

“Chu Beijie's power is unmatched. Even courage cannot stop him. Apart from the Prince Consort, no one else can last ten rounds. The Prince Consort is the most valiant warrior of my Yun Chang.”

“The Prince Consort's plan is very clever. First lure them to Youfu Forest, then attack through Dong Lin's right flank.”

“The light of fire has filled the sky, not settling for two whole days and two nights. Thirty miles of the dark forests have been reduced to ashes as of today.”

“If it hadn't been for the Prince Consort, this battle would have no hope.”

“I have been leading soldiers for many years but never have I seen such an army with such a powerful morale and generals in a battle. The real war is dawning, and although the Prince Consort is able, I fear both sides shall suffer immense loss. I urge Princess to hand down an Order, so the Prince Consort can do everything to stop this battle.”

“Yun Chang's Prince Consort is indeed a mighty general and is the sky's blessing to my Yun Chang. If we are able to defeat Chu Beijie's army, then my Yun Chang will forever be the most superior of the four countries.”

“As long as Dong Lin has Chu Beijie, my Yun Chang will never be able to win. I risk death in writing such a report. Please consider, Princess.”

Each report had been crammed with several hundreds of words. No matter which stance they took, all of their blood

Yaotian carefully read through each of the reports from the frontlines and rubbed her temples. She rubbed them again before opening the side window's curtain.

The night had fallen on Yun Chang, peaceful like usual. The shadow of the big battle was like a hidden beast, jumping out and biting off a piece of human flesh before scampering away into the darkness.

"Pass on the Order to move even faster. Rong An, how far are we still from the camp?"

Rong An, the captain in charge of her personal guards, led his horse closer to the carriage. "Replying to Princess, the Jiu Cliffs are just beyond the mountains ahead. We will definitely reach there by tomorrow at noon."

"Do the people at the camp...know I am on the way?"

"Strictly following orders, the messengers were not allowed to leak Princess' location. The camp does not know Princess is soon to arrive there." Rong An then lowered his voice, "But it will be terrible if they mistake you for an enemy. Please allow me to hang Princess' flag of the Royal Cabin tomorrow on the carriage to prevent such mistake."

"Hm, go ahead then." Yaotian lowered the curtain and leaned back on the soft pillows.

She read most of the reports on the table. Although all of the generals thought different things, they were all thinking the best for their country.

They all knew He Xia's swordsmanship was extraordinary, above most people.

They all knew that they were fighting a crazed Chu Beijie. Even if they won, they would not return without casualties.

They wanted to do their best but felt pained by the many corpses of sons of Yun Chang.

Yaotian bit back a cold smile and slowly closed her eyes.

The husband she had chosen did have the power to oppose Chu Beijie, but now was not the time to show off his ability. When two tigers fight, at least one will always be hurt. Why couldn't they solve it peacefully, not fighting to their bitter ends?

If Bai Pingting were gone, then the Chu Beijie who was crazed for her would undoubtedly go too.

If Chu Beijie were gone then the world would fall into the hands of that kind, gentle smiling man.

"Rest assured, Princess. No matter what, I will never blame Princess about anything in my lifetime."

"He Xia will swear right now that there will be a day where I'll make Princess become the noblest woman in the world and then personally crown the Princess as the Queen of the Four Countries."

His eyes had glittered like stars, full of a profoundly magical power that pulled her into its depths.

On their wedding night, he had knelt down before her with one knee, held her hands as he swore to the skies.

He Xia, that Marquess of Jing-An, that famous general.

He was her Prince Consort.

He was the one she had picked painstakingly from a large crowd and entrusted her life to him

Behind every man, they have a destined woman in their life.

Bai Pingting, Chu Beijie is fighting for you and will stop fighting for you. A pity really, such a great man of fame and ambition to be ruined in your hands with his love for you.

A wasted man, once a heroic general.

He Xia is different. In his heart, you are only a guest of fifteen years in his path of life.

He is my husband, my Yun Chang's Prince Consort.

Forever will be.

After days of travel, they were very tired.

Most of the money had been spent in the capital to buy all sorts of stuff to protect themselves. As the two walked on, they spent more on buying horses, food, hotels until not much was left. It was good that they were now closer to the border. There were many more possible paths to Bei Mo. It seemed that the Senior Official of Yun Chang did not lay many traps to stop them now, so it had been much less dangerous.

Pingting and Zuiju had become a lot thinner over the days as the numerous enemies leapt towards them day after day. It had been a battle of wits for Pingting. She crossed each obstacle without batting an eyelash. Zuiju had never met such vicious intent to kill in her life and was terribly scared. She gradually began to find humour in the pain after a while.

"It's the Songsen Mountains! Hah, just one more day til we get to Bei Mo." The Songsen mountains that marked the edge between Bei Mo and Yun Chang had finally entered their line of sight. Zuiju celebrated in glee as she pointed towards them to let Pingting see.

Pingting hid a smile. She looked at them for a while before nodding. "You're right; it's the Songsen Mountains." Her delicate face was full of weariness after walking all day.

Zuiju carefully studied her colour before saying, "Let's stop hurrying today. There's a family cabin up ahead. Let's go ask for lodging. When we get there, I'll brew some fetal medicine. Don't excuse yourself by saying it's bitter. You have to drink every single drop of it."

"It really is bitter though." Pingting began to frown. "The prescriptions I make are never as bitter. I have been pretty good these last few days, no nausea or vomiting."

"No, I am the doctor. You know anaesthetics and poisons, but if it's medicine to save, I'm better than you. Your conditions aren't the same as before either. You mustn't overestimate yourself." Zuiju glared at her.

Pingting hid a smile to herself and nodded. "Yes, genius Doctor Zuiju."

The family cabin up ahead belonged to an old couple who were hunters. Pitying the two delicate and charming girls who asked for a night's stay, they readily agreed and allowed them to stay overnight in a clean little room.

Zuiju opened her bag on the bed. Not much of the herbs she brought on the way remained. It seemed she was missing one type for the prescription. She then packed up the bag and went outside to ask the old woman, "Missus, are there any Mo grass on the mountains nearby?"

“The entire mountain is full of it. This grass is a weed in nature, and it does not die in winter. If you go to the foot of the mountain and push away the snow, you’ll find huge clumps of it.” The Missus was then curious, “Why does Miss want Mo grass? Isn’t that for woman with children?”

“Oh...” Zuiju laughed. “Nothing much. You see, my older sister and I are travelling from far away to see Brother. His wife is pregnant, and I wanted to get some so it can be used to help strengthen his wife’s body when we get there.”

“True. Poor families who can’t buy medicine use this to help strengthen. It’s the most effective. I reckon it’s even better than ginseng.” The Missus laughed, the wrinkles on her face like flowers, as conversation with a girl was very rare in such a remote place.

“Then I’ll go pick some.”

“There’s a lot of loose rocks on the way. Be careful.”

Zuiju walked for a few steps and turned back again, worried. “My sis has been tired after a day’s walk and is currently taking a nap. When she wakes up, please pass a message onto her that I have gone to get some herbs and will be back soon. Matron, please help look after my sister for a while.”

“Understood, don’t worry Miss!”

Zuiju then borrowed a shovel to dig through the snow and finally left.

Pingting slept sweetly for a while and groggily woke up. She opened her mouth to summon Zuiju. However, she did not hear anything and couldn’t help feeling it was strange. She sat up and realised Zuiju’s bag was by her foot, a few herbs scattering out of it.

“Zuiju?” She got off the bed and quietly called a few more times. She was met with silence. Pingting turned to look outside the window. The sky was already a dark gray.

“Zuiju, where are you?” The voice was a little higher.

There was the sound of the curtain being lifted as someone entered. Pingting happily turned around, only to find that it was the Missus of the cabin.

“Miss, your younger sister has gone to get some Mo grass for your sister in law.” The Missus smiled kindly. “The food is already made. Let’s eat together though there isn’t much vegetables.”

“Thank you Missus.” Pingting replied softly, revealing a small smile of gratitude. She followed the Missus to a simple little room. Her mute husband was already seated by the table. Tidily made dishes laid on the table—a dish of radish, a dish of steamed fish and half of pot of rice porridge made from various grains. All of them were steaming hot.

The mute Mister gestured as he said, “Ahhhh....Ah!”

Only the Missus understood what he meant and explained to Pingting, “Miss, sit down and eat. Don’t worry, your sis said she was just going to the foot of the mountain and will be back soon.”

“Thank you Sir, thank you Missus.” Pingting looked out at the dark sky outside the window.

Although the dishes were very rough, the old couple was very attentive to her needs. The little room was filled with a warm atmosphere. Pingting placed her chopsticks down and looked outside the window. It was already dark.

She still did not see Zuiju’s figure and began to worry again

“My, how could your sis still not be back?” The Missus was also looked worriedly outside. “It’s just to the foot of the mountain, not that far. She should be back by now.”

Pingting’s heart was full of unease. She paced around in the little front courtyard a few times. Although Zuiju was clever, the mountains at night were no joke. What if she were to meet with beasts, crazy with hunger pent up over the winter?

She had made Zuiju wait at the hotel in the capital for a while and laughed at her expression, saying she worried too much. She only now realised that worrying about someone else was a much more terrible feeling than worrying about herself. Since leaving with Zuiju, they had been inseparable. She grew more and more restless until she could bear it no longer. “Matron, I think I’ll go find her after all.”

The Mister uttered a few sounds and held her back with his powerful grip.

The Missus also replied, “Wait for a little longer. If your sis doesn’t see you when she comes back, she’ll be even more worried.”

“No, no. I will just take a look around the foot of the mountain and be back immediately.” Pingting borrowed a flaming torch and asked about the direction Zuiju had set off. She then said, “Missus, if my sis comes back, make sure to not let her leave again. If I don’t see her at the foot of the mountain, I will immediately head back.”

The Missus sighed. “As expected of two sisters. She told me again and again to look after you when she left. Now you are telling me to look after her when you leave. Be a good Miss and just look around the foot of the mountain. It’s dark, so don’t climb it.”

“Understood.”

Although it was night, the wind wasn’t very strong. Pingting walked stably, the flame drawing a long tail behind itself as if trying to chase after her figure.

Not long later, she had reached the foot of the mountain.

The moonlight fell on every inch of the outside, but stopped at that point, not invading into the forest after it.

The shadows of the branches seemed to resemble human figures. She raised her torch, but where was Zuiju?

“Zuiju! Zuiju!” She looked around for a while and raised her voice to call.

Invisible waves of echoes bounced again and again out of the forest.

Pingting stood by the forest, studying carefully around it. There were a few marks of someone digging in the snow. She hurriedly crouched down. It seemed that someone had indeed plucked the grass and herbs. The snapped parts remained in the snow. Pingting followed the trail of marks and soon found a few footsteps imprinted lightly into the snow. If she hadn’t been so carefully searching or holding a torch, she might have missed them. She slowly followed the footsteps, one after the other. Only when the thick silhouette of the forest’s massive trees covered her head did she look up and come to a stop.

Zuiju had gone into the forest.

She didn’t know why, but her heart suddenly jolted and pain flooded into it.

“Zuiju! Zuiju! Where are you?” Pingting began to yell loudly, using her energy to yell

A desolate sorrow rushed into her heart, making her feel more helpless than ever. She didn't see a person's face but faced with the silence of the huge mountain. There were no enemies, no traps she dealt in the past with no idea.

The silence of the mountains and forest belittled her. Pingting had never felt so lonely.

"Where are you?" She suddenly turned, her pale face illuminated by the flames. With all her wisdom, she could not give a reasonable explanation of her feelings. She did not understand why she had dropped her guard when she had thought her freedom was near.

She stood on the gleaming white snow. The left side was full of the moonlight while her right was full of dark forest. Even the sound of the winter bugs could not be heard, causing her to suddenly realise she was alone.

"Where are you?" She whispered, unable to muster the energy she had before.

The torch continued to burn, producing the slightest sound. Yet it was this slight sound that became the sole rhythm in the silence of the nothingness.

A pair of profoundly deep, sparkling black eyes surfaced on her mind.

She straightened her shoulders. They had promised to tightly hold on to each other, yet why had she ended up alone in this dark forest?

His invincible sword could shake the earth yet didn't have a heart to comfort her troubled soul.

In the deep night where not a soul could be seen, Pingting's tears couldn't help flowing. Even Pingting couldn't understand why the pain she had hidden so deeply in her heart would surface again, causing her tears to endlessly flow in this dark and endless forest. They fell to the ground, not leaving any trace.

She lowered her head and grinded her teeth furiously. She lowered the torch to look at every single teardrop on the snow. Then, she abruptly lifted her head again and yelled, "Zuiju! Zuiju! Where are you?" Her tearstained face was full of sorrow and despair.

"Miss! I'm over here!" A clear echo suddenly jumped out from the silent forest.

Pingting seemed to stiffen at this. She raised her torch and looked on.

As expected, a figure hurled out of the looming, shadowy forest. She carried a small basket as she quickly ran to her, gasping. "I didn't expect this mountain had other good herbs. I followed the ones I wanted and went in unwittingly. Then it got dark and I almost couldn't find the way back. Luckily Miss came here. Ah..." Seeing Pingting's red eyes under the flickering light, Zuiju suddenly stopped walking and lowered her voice to a whisper. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Already crying like this..." Zuiju held onto Pingting's hands, which was as cold as ice, no hint of warmth. "It's all my fault. Sorry for making Miss worried."

Pingting smiled bitterly.

She had always been praised by others for her heart, but only she understood how ridiculous she was. How could Zuiju possibly know what she was thinking right now?

She blinked, freeing another teardrop to silently slide out

Zuiju's heart was distressed for her. "Miss, don't cry. Am I not back? I won't do such thing again."

Pingting turned away, her voice very faint. "These herbs are not important. You should cherish yourself; it's such a cold day after all." The two people then slowly headed back.

Zuiju then said, "I'll hold it." She took the torch from Pingting, her other hand carrying the little basket. She remained restless and kept on looking back to check Pingting's red eyes. She studied her, saying, "What is Miss thinking?"

Pingting walked in silence with her head lowered as if she hadn't heard her words. After a while, however, she opened her mouth to reply. "I'm thinking about the letter I wrote to him."

Hearing Pingting taking the initiative to mention "him" gave Zuiju a massive shock. She was too afraid to touch on the subject that had made her cry so often, didn't dare ask anything. She continued to walk in silence.

Not long later, she heard Pingting slowly say, "When I picked up the brush that day, although I wrote many things, my mind was a complete mess. Now that I think about it, perhaps it was a letter from the voice of my heart that even I don't understand myself."

Zuiju couldn't help asking, "What did Miss write?"

Pingting seemed to be considering to say or not. Her lips moved slightly. It then all changed to a sigh. "Even if I tell you, it'll just add to your pile of troubles."

The two fell into another silence. No one made any sound as they continued to walk back. They raised their heads to see the flickering candlelight of the little cabin in the distance. They suddenly heard a piercing, violent roar that rumbled the earth. "Damn old geezers, how dare you talk back!" The crisp sound of a slap was suspended in the night sky.

Pingting and Zuiju's hearts skipped a beat. Their nerves were hardened from the repeated escapes from the clutches of the enemy. They quickly lowered the torch into the snow, extinguishing it, and hid behind a boulder beside the road.

Under the moonlight, they quietly probed inside. They could make out blurry shapes of men menacingly blocking the entrance to the cabin.

"If it 'adn't been for us Officials standing up to Chu Beijie, then Dong Lin would have stormed inside and your heads would have become balls for the people of Dong Lin to kick around. Soldiers must be fed so they can fight. How could ya still hope to live if ya don't pay taxes?"

The Missus' kind tone had become full of panic and fear at the same time. "Officials, we have already paid our taxes for the year two days ago..."

"That was two days ago; today's is for today!" A furious voice broke out.

A crackling sound was heard. It seemed that someone had broken the old wooden door with a kick.

"We really have nothing."

"Nothing? Hmph, what's this?" The sharp voice interrupted and a man who had long broken into the cabin had plundered a pile of various objects. He sneered, "Even though ya'll so old, ya still 'av some pretty good stuff."

"Ah! Ahhh....ah..." The mute Mister waved and gestured with his hands, stopping the man.

The Missus hurriedly explained, "Sir, Sir, these are not our things. These belong to the two Misses who are staying in the cabin..."

"Piss off!" The man kicked the old Mister onto the ground, his voice vicious. "How do they not belong to you if they are in your cabin? Tell ya what, these things shall suffice as today's tax. If you still refuse to pay up in two day's time, then we'll burn this rot'en home in one go!"

Holding onto Pingting and Zuiju's bags, they left. The two waited for them to go far before peeping out to see their back view.

"Such cruel and evil henchmen." Zuiju muttered furiously. "Those are things you see everyday, even our Dong Lin has it. When seeing rich masters or ranking officials, they act like sweet puppies. In reality, they're as cruel as wolves. If they ever fall into my Teacher's hands, he will definitely punish."

Pingting gazed until their backs had disappeared before whispering back. "But what else can we do? I often regret it these days. What was the point of learning qin and dancing? Martial arts and swordsmanship would have been so much better. Even if the ground was uneven, an unsheathed sword could aid walking. Curse my uselessness, I can't even help myself, how could I possibly begin to think to help others?"

Zuiju disagreed. "Isn't Miss pretty good these days? Why suddenly start regretting again? How many are there with the same ability as you under the skies?"

Even though her words were cheerful, she suddenly thought of the Duke. It wasn't wrong. After all, even clever woman would be afraid when they encountered close combat. If she had been by the Duke's side, he would have naturally protected her, making sure no one harmed a hair of hers.

But without someone to protect her, she could only protect herself.

The two people stood up from the boulder at the same time. Pingting got up a little too abruptly and was dizzy by it. Her foot did not stabilise on the ground, and her shoulder shook a little.

"Be careful Miss!" Zuiju hurriedly said, stretching out a hand to support her.

"I'm fine." Pingting casually replied back, suddenly stable again. She raised her foot, but it had no idea which direction to turn to. This time, she was unfortunately no longer able to support her weight again. Her body felt light and empty before her body headed towards the ground.

In a blink of the eye, Zuiju had already hurried forwards, her hand grabbing onto Pingting's wrist. She hadn't expect that Pingting would fall down this time. She could not support her whole body weight. After all, Zuiju too had only just stood up. This caught her off guard, so her attempt was met with failure. She screamed as Pingting's body dragged hers down and they fell together. Her knees knocked painfully into a rock. Her hands t skidded on the rock, causing them to sting with a burning sensation. Although it was painful, Zuiju still managed to get up, not caring about her own pain. She held Pingting and hurriedly asked, "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

Pingting only felt her mind becoming clearer after being helped up by Zuiju. She shook her head, saying, "I'm fine." She thought for a little as if carefully considering whether she was actually hurt or not but didn't feel any pain at all.

"Are you hurt?"

"No." Pingting rubbed her hands and shook her head.

Zuiju finally sighed in relief. "That scared me to death. Let's go back now."

The two people returned to the cabin. The room had been turned upside down. Furniture were either scattered or damaged. The mute Mister sat dazedly in the corner, while the Missus cried unhappily. When she saw Pingting and Zuiju, she raised her head and stopped crying. An indescribably sad expression appeared on her face. "Miss, your bags..."

"We already know. Mister and Missus are not at fault. Besides, there's nothing particularly important in those bags." Pingting said a few comforting words that finally stopped the tears of the old couple.

They then helped them to clean up the room and put back the furniture. All were exhausted as they retreated back to their rooms to rest.

Thinking that the dwindling money they had for the journey was already gone, having no change of clothes, meant the prospects were quite bleak. The two couldn't help but find it funny.

"The money and the clothes aren't that important at all; it's the people. It's not hard to earn money. We can just heal as we proceed." Zuiju helped Pingting to lie on the bed, "Give me your hand." She then pressed two fingers and calmly listened to the pulse in silence. She suddenly said, "Hm" before looking puzzledly at Pingting, "Where do you feel uncomfortable?"

"What's wrong? Is the child sick?" Pingting was also very surprised.

"Where do you feel uncomfortable?"

"No where."

Zuiju replied, "Let me listen again." She carefully checked her wrist and her neck but still frowned. "The pulse is a little strange. Could it be you caught a cold tonight? Geez, I should've said not to let you look for me. Lie down and don't move again." She took out the basket.

Pingting cared immensely for the child's safety and obediently stayed lying down peacefully. She then began to feel drowsy, the light in her eyes becoming tiny slits until darkness covered. At the end of the darkness, there seemed to be a dim light gracefully swaying. She was feeling very comfortable until she was gently shaken at the shoulder. Pingting opened her eyes and looked at Zuiju, a bowl of medicine placed at the head of the bed. She was blowing off the steam that wafted while softly saying, "Drink this medicine and sleep after that. Those evil-hearted henchmen, not even sparing medicinal herbs. Fortunately I had picked fresh ones today."

Zuiju only took back the medicine bowl, satisfied after Pingting had finished the entire bowl with a scowl. She blew the lights out and the two slept together. They had walked a whole day. Zuiju had immediately set off to look for herbs after asking for lodging, as well as a whole bunch of other incidents. Zuiju was very much more tired than Pingting. She immediately fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow. With so little energy, she was deeply embedded inside her dream world. In her dream, she saw her Teacher's stern face, yet his kind eyes hid his laughter. Then she was back in the secluded residence amongst the plum blossoms, seeing a blurry figure before her that appeared to be gazing at the bright moon. The dreams continued after the next, each stranger and stranger. Each seemed to emit a warm taste and was like a path to a different story. She knew each story had a happy ending.

In the softness of the dream, there was suddenly a stab of pain from somewhere she did not know. Zuiju fought in her dream and struggled. It was like her hand hurt or maybe her leg. Gradually, the pain seemed to float like ice from the bottom of the sea to the top, forcing herself out of her dream world.

Zuiju suddenly opened her eyes and felt another wave of pain.

This time, she knew it was raw pain from being clawed by something.

“Zuiju....Zuiju...” Pingting moaned painfully in the darkness.

Zuiju was so shocked she immediately sat up. Under the moonlight, Pingting’s delicate eyebrows had bunched up and her fingernails were deeply sunk into Zuiju’s wrist.

“Miss, what’s wrong?”

“It hurts.” Pingting touched her lower abdomen. Sweat drops the size of soybeans began to ooze out of her forehead, falling onto the pillow.

Zuiju was alarmed by this. “I’m here, don’t worry.” She flipped over to find it, only to remember that her bag had been stolen already. She didn’t even have a coat to put on when she hurriedly found the door to where the elderly couple were sleeping behind. She thumped loudly on the door, yelling, “Missus! Missus! Wake up!”

“What’s wrong, Miss?”

Zuiju grabbed onto the Missus’ wrist, “Silver needles! Do you have silver needles?”

The Missus had only just been woken and was very drowsy. “We’re poor, how are we to find things like silver needles?”

“Then...normal needles? Embroidery needles?” Zuiju was on the brink of tears in worry.

“I have one tarnished needle for sewing clothes. What are you...”

“Don’t ask, lend it to me!”

Zuiju took the needle and hurried back to the room. She lit the candle, its light revealing Pingting soaked in sweat. The pillow had been completely soaked in her sweat, her face yellow. Seeing Zuiju enter, she endured the pain and barely stuttered her words as she asked, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing much.” Zuiju hurriedly put the rusty embroidery needle into the candlelight, quickly reply, “Just need to use a needle to pierce Miss a few times. No need to be afraid.” Her tone was relaxed, but she was trembling. The needle was almost glowing red, but Zuiju seemed to no feel the burning heat at all. She pinched the end of the needle as she headed towards the bed, softly coaxing, “Don’t worry, it won’t hurt after a few pierces.” She told Pingting to lie down and carefully undid Pingting’s clothing.

Waves of pain came from Pingting’s lower abdomen as if a herd of crazy wild horses were trampling all over the place inside it. There was no way she could endure even more pain. Seeing Zuiju was holding a needle and that she was intending to pierce there, she couldn’t help feel surprised. She didn’t know where to start explaining and suddenly propped herself up a little, stopping Zuiju. “You won’t harm my child right?”

Zuiju didn’t hesitate to reply, “Of course not, believe me.”

Only then did Pingting let go. All of the pain had drained all of her energy. She fell down onto the sweat-soaked bed covered with hair from her tossing.

Her belly began to warm a little, followed by another warmth. Zuiju continued to pierce a few spots when suddenly, all of the pain seemed to explode out as if a landmine had been set off.

Pingting began to scream “Ahh” and struggled a bit before curling up like a dead shrimp. She then seemed to come back to life as if the pain had subsided. She frowned feeling the sensation. The pain had suddenly flooded out, then poured out of the gap where the needle had been

“Feeling better?” Zuiju’s voice floated in her ear, sounding very, very distant.

Several moments later, Pingting finally exhaled. “Yeah...”

Zuiju was sweating too. Hearing Pingting’s reply, she finally put down the needle in her hand, propping herself to a sit.

“Is the child...okay?”

Zuiju replied, “I’ve already told you, your body is weak so don’t try to be so ambitious. Sigh...”

“Zuiju?”

“You, lie down properly. Your child is fine,” Zuiju raised her head and saw the Missus who had been awoken by them looking curiously from outside the door. She hurriedly went forwards to apologise, “My apologies for waking up Mister and Missus.”

“Miss...”

“My sis is sick.”

“Oh.” The Missus looked behind her into the room. She lowered her voice, “Is she feeling better now?”

“Much better. It’s fine, Missus can go to sleep.”

When she finally convinced the Missus to leave, Zuiju sat down by the bed again. “We can’t continue on. You’d better get some rest for a few days.”

Pingting didn’t make a sound for a long time.

“We can’t stay here, we have to go. Now that those people have our bags, who knows who will end up with them?” Pingting finally gathered up her energy and her voice was low. “If they are to chase us, we won’t be able to go even if we wanted to.”

Zuiju sighed again.

Pingting then asked, “What’s wrong with my body? You mustn’t hide things from me.”

Zuiju was both angry and sad. Her voice choked up unwittingly. “How could Miss still not understand? Your body wasn’t strong to begin with. How could it possibly last such a journey with so many worries and trouble? I have to get some good herbs. Even wild ginseng or ganoderma, it’d be good.”

Pingting had broken into a cold sweat when she was in pain, but now it was gone. She felt the coldness seeping through her skin. She covered herself with a blanket and smiled kindly. “I’ll listen to your words and won’t hurriedly leave this place, so I can get some rest for a few days, fine?”

Zuiju wiped away her tears and ground her teeth. “Now I really detest the Duke. If you have a lover, then you should properly protect her and cherish her. How could he let Miss be reduced to this? No matter how you look at it, he’s the one at fault!”

Pingting didn’t expect she would bring up Chu Beijie. She stiffened but then remembered her child. Pingting agreed every word she had said. After all, she had spent great effort on Chu Beijie but still fell to such a fate.

She couldn't think like the way she had lived up to any more.

The clash between country and lovers never bore any fruit of worth.

She had always faintly expected it but completely unable to prevent it from happening to herself.

"Never mind." Pingting softly sighed and closed her eyes. "Don't waste any more time and effort on that person or our lives will be meaninglessly wasted." She gently stroked her own belly. Although no one could detect it by sight, one could feel a small bump if they carefully touched it.

My child, don't get caught up by national affairs and love any more.

Morality is like a ruler at first, but in the end, it becomes a heavy lock and a blood-coloured cloth. It prisons your heart and blindfolds your eyes.

Don't be like your father, and don't be like your mother either.

Dear child, whether you love or hate, don't ever forget your roots.

Don't forget it.

Light purple beacons were ignited one after the other, connecting the sky. The smoke spiralled upwards, telling the rest of the people on earth that the great battle was imminent. The flags rose into the skies, ominous in return.

A distant horn sounded and couldn't hide its own mournful tone.

From far away, it was a densely packed sea of iron helmets. Thousands of weapons were pointed straight towards the sky, gleaming with their cold lights. Every inch of the plains was covered with the cavalry units of the Dong Lin army.

Chu Beijie was sitting on his horse, standing straight towards the wind at the very front of the army. The flag of the Duke of Zhen-Bei was raised above him, flapping vigorously and forcefully in the wind. It was like a frightening totem that could suck away the enemy's energy.

On the slope opposite them, another coloured flag was floating in the distance, also belonging to a truly massive army.

Yun Chang, that country that had always hidden itself, never revealed its face. As a result, it had a lot of time to build up a significant amount of reserve forces and were not to be underestimated.

Chu Beijie began to squint, trying to see that figure, confidently standing at the very front of their army. He was the main advisor of the Yun Chang army.

He remembered the figure that peered down from the top of the Three-Swallow Cliffs, smiling. He was that person back then.

The Marquess of Jing-An back then, now the Prince Consort of Yun Chang.

And the man who stole Pingting out of his hands!

The strong wind blew between them but seemed to be afraid of the imminent war and soon hurried away.

There was a sudden, deathly quiet. An unheard, anxious rhythm grew quicker and quicker, seeming to be play in the silence. The several hundreds of thousands of men stood on the plains, as still and as quiet as graves. Even their horses didn't dare to neigh.

Chu Beijie quietly watched He Xia. They were separated by a massive gap, but they still seemed to be able to see the opponent's gaze. It was as sharp as his and just as penetrating.

He stole Pingting, stole the Pingting pregnant with my flesh and blood.

Chu Beijie's hand silently pressed down on his sword.

The moment he unsheathed it, fights without rest would begin, endless. There was no turning back.

Chen Mu was standing by Chu Beijie's side. His palm was drenched with sweat like the other general. He knew that the moment Chu Beijie's sword came out of his scabbard, all these hundreds of thousands would charge forward, resulting in many overwhelming waves of blood.

For a single person.

For a single woman.

Bai Pingting, a name forever remembered by all of the four countries.

All of the gazes were fixed on Chu Beijie's hands. All of the soldiers' fates rested on that one touch between his hand and his sword.

The air was very tense, and breaths were a tiny thread, stretched until taut. It slowly tightened in the empty gap between the two armies.

The sound of a horse dashing came.

On the southern side of the mountains, there was a few sudden movements. It barged in from the side, not caring at all about the two armies and spilled out onto the empty gap between them. Its movement resembled a light cut with a sword through an oil painting that was about to be lit, bringing beauty to the bleak picture. It brightened the entire picture in one go, although strange and out of place.

"The flag of the Royal House of Yun Chang?" Che Mu lowered his voice in disbelief.

Chu Beijie's gaze looked beyond him, long imprinting the large words on the flag into his eyes. A light flashed in his eyes. The first person to arrive took the flag and rode towards Chu Beijie and his horse. He bowed slightly, asking in a clear voice, "Is this general Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen Bei, Chu Beijie?"

"I am Chu Beijie. Who are you?" Chu Beijie's voice was deep.

"I am the captain of Yun Chang's Royal Residence guards, Rong An. My Master, Princess Yaotian, has ordered me to pass on a message. I ask for Duke's private attention for a moment."

"A battle is about to begin. Where is Princess Yaotian right now?"

"She is here." Rong An pointed behind him.

The crowd immediately looked afar. There was an ornately decorated carriage on the slope of the hill. It had only arrived in the morning and immediately rushed towards the centre of the two armies.

Chu Beijie's heart seemed to be pulled by an invisible string, shock flooded onto his eyes.

Yaotian wanted to settle things peacefully.

What else could she use to bargain apart from Pingting? Yaotian must've hurried to stop the real battle between the two armies and avoided He Xia, heading straight for himself. It had to be related to Pingting.

His heart that kept on emitting coldness suddenly began to flare up like a fire. He was suddenly too emotional and didn't know what to do.

The carriage began to drive closer. The other side seemed to have recognised the flag of the own Royal House and too shocked into silence.

Rong An brought his horse to the carriage and gestured a few times by the window. He then rode back to say, "The Princess welcomes Duke onto the carriage for a while."

The carriage stopped on the gap, the four snowy-white horses had their heads down as they trotted forwards and stopped. Perhaps the driver received an order from the person in the carriage as they got off to leave on their own. They then stopped about a hundred footsteps away, awaiting further orders patiently.

Chen Mu warned him, "Be careful, Duke. He Xia has too many schemes, be careful not to be ambushed."

Chu Beijie laughed coldly. "It's just a mere carriage. Even if it's filled with people, how could it possibly match the precious sword in my hand?" He then rode to the carriage, calmly asking, "Is Yun Chang's Princess Yaotian in there? Chu Beijie is here. Would Princess like to say anything?"

Yaotian lifted the curtains, raising her eyes to look at Chu Beijie who was sitting on the horse, looking majestic and imposing. She praised his style in her heart and softened her voice. "Yaotian has been asked to pass on a letter to Duke."

"Just a letter?" Chu Beijie's pupils shrank. The air around him turned icy. "And the person?"

"The person is no longer in my Yun Chang." Yaotian replied. "Duke will understand after reading this letter."

Chu Beijie's expression became even colder as he gazed through the curtain, fighting a cold staring contest. He then said, "Princess underestimates me. My Dong Lin army has travelled thousands of miles to reach this place just to find that person. If Yun Chang cannot return the person to me, thinking a letter will make me withdraw, how could I possibly follow through such a lame request? Don't blame that I don't believe you, but if that person is harmed in any possible way, I swear to let all of the Yun Chang Royal House's blood to flow."

Yaotian was silent for a long time in the carriage, before she sighed sadly. "Yaotian heard of the Duke of Zhen-Bei's fame as a hero but has a question to ask."

Chu Beijie had wanted to walk away but changed his mind. He could not overestimate anything related to Pingting. He held his reins saying, "Please go ahead, Princess."

Yaotian then said, "I'd like to ask whether this time leading the soldiers into battle is just for a single person named Bai Pingting?"

"Correct."

"Then did the King of Dong Lin agree to it?"

Chu Beijie sneered, “This is my Dong Lin’s affairs, and the army is here. It’s nothing to do with Princess.”

“The relationship between the Duke and Miss Bai is deeply rooted in the hatred between countries. The question of whether country or feeling is more important and particularly whether giving up their own happiness for their country has always been a cruel dilemma.”

“What is Princess trying to say?”

Yaotian sighed. “Theory and morality are often said together, but they are not quite the same. Morality comes from the heart, but theory is based from ethical principles. Theory is often the most correct and complete, so it often overrides morality. As a result, people blindly follow general ethical principles and don’t listen to their heart. They obey so-called national interests and sacrifice themselves to the country. It is a real pity if they didn’t do so willingly, from deep in their hearts, thanks to the lock of theory. How is the Duke not like this, that day when Duke chose the country over Pingting, resulting in violating the promise of the sixth?”

Chu Beijie was indifferent at first but was suddenly full of emotion upon her words. His voice became serious, “Please continue, Princess.”

“Country or people, which is more important? It is not a problem solved by trade-offs.” Yaotian paused for effect before leisurely continuing, “Duke may have thought that the ancestors of our history have decided to unite together to resist external enemies and resist violence in order to live better, so they have their own happiness. Only then did countries begin to form. The fundamental roots of a country has always been its people. What is there to live for, the moment a person sacrifices their happiness to protect the country? What is the point in remembering a man who only knows how to protect the country and doesn’t understand the importance of cherishing their happiness?”

Chu Beijie’s body began to shake. His grip tightened around the reins, only hearing Yaotian continue with, “And how could a man who, for his own search for happiness, is willing to sacrifice the lives of hundreds of thousands of soldiers to form an army that steals others’ happiness, be the hero that Bai Pingting truly loves? Think, Duke, do all of these soldiers in your hands really wish to fight a battle for a single woman?”

Yaotian sighed once and lowered her voice. “What Bai Pingting wants is for Duke’s eyes to open, be able to see what needs to be appreciated in this world, who is to be cherished. She wants you to see that even in the ant colonies. They have freedom and ambition but always in sight of their own happiness.”

Chu Beijie’s teeth were tightly clenched and for the longest time, he was speechless.

In the morning light, Pingting’s smile had been gentle like water but now it had melted into all lakes and seas, not leaving any trace to be found.

The fundamental roots of a country has always been its people.

If it wasn’t done willingly from the heart, why force oneself to sacrifice the things dearest to them in exchange for the country’s reputation?

Country and people were not two separate choices, but one.

Only those who listened to their heart, loved what they loved and hated what they hated, were real people.

Chu Beijie abruptly raised his head at the sky, laughing to the skies as his tears slid along his cheeks. He lowered his voice, “Thank you for pointing these out, Princess.”

A letter was slowly handed out of the curtain

“Yaotian only had a few experiences, not enough to be worthy of your praise. Those words came from Miss Bai’s letter.”

Chu Beijie got off the horse, taking the wavering letter as tender as newborn babies. A shiver ran up his spine, “Thank you, Princess. I swear to Princess that the Dong Lin army will withdraw immediately.”

Yaotian hadn’t expected that he would so cleanly decide his withdrawal. She hesitated slightly, before asking, “Is Duke not afraid this letter is false and that Miss Bai is still in imprisonment?”

Chu Beijie laughed. “If Pingting hadn’t confidence, why would she ask Princess to pass on a letter? Handwriting can be forged but can wise words be?”

He turned his horse and rode back to his army. Chen Mu had become impatient early in his wait and hurriedly came forwards to ask, “What on earth did the Princess of Yun Chang say?”

“Withdraw the troops.”

“What?”

Chu Beijie chuckled for a long time. “Withdraw! We’re not fighting a battle anymore.”

Even though everyone was secretly stunned by this, they were also pleasantly surprised. Some people asked, “What about the Duchess then?”

“I’ll look for her myself.” Chu Beijie gazed into the depths of the sky, determination filling his eyes. “I will find her, even if she is at the end of the world.”

God have mercy, please bless me with Pingting.

You can fly towards the sky with your wings. Chu Beijie is willing to follow you until the ends of the earth.

From today on, I will love what I love and hate what I hate.

I understand what I want to do and understand what I should do.

I understand what I should appreciate and therefore shall appreciate; what I should sever ties with and therefore shall sever ties with.

I understand that country and home, country and people, have always been one.

I understand that sacrifice is not great, but only by appreciating the people I love, can a country thrive. That in itself is a powerful pair of wings that soars towards ambition, just like how flowing red blood does the same.

Pingting, Pingting, I have heard the voice of my heart.

It says that life after life, it must never part from you.

Even if the earth shatters or the highest power tries to interfere, this feeling will always endure.

“Withdraw the army!”

“Withdraw! Withdraw!”

The army of Dong Lin withdrew and the final battle was stopped at the final moment.

Chu Beijie gazed into the horizon, not able to see that familiar body. But he would go to find her, he had to find her and lovingly protect her as he accompanies her under the stars, as she plays qin or as she watches the stars in the snow.

Together they would watch over the growing children, teaching him not to go astray and be shackled by dark depression. He will then always remember that morality comes from the heart and only by listening to the voice of the heart, can one never be blindfolded by the world.

Let him understand that people have their own dignity, people have their own ambition, people have their own freedom and people have their own happiness.

These were not things that national interests or the moral good could deprive them of.

Because, the fundamental roots of a country has always been one thing – its people.

Translation Notes:

- “Fangniang” (ch38) – Fictional.
- “Gui Changqing” (ch38)– I thought he was a woman (ch27), but seems like I was wrong. Makes much more sense though.
- “Life after life” (ch41): The idea of reincarnation and karma.
- “Luyi” (ch38) – Her name’s pinyin is officially, “Lvyyi”, but that is not something humanly possible to pronounce.
- “Mo grass” (ch41) – Fictional plant. There is a slightly similar plant in name but not function, so fictional.
- “Paved the way” (ch41) – The maids entered before Yaotian and prepped the way by bowing at the sides, leaving a clear space for her to walk through. Shows respect.
- “Tanghulu” (ch41) – A food, like candied fruit.
- “Qixiang flowers” (ch38)– Fictional.

Book Five

"Initial Lonesome Fragrance"

Chapter 45

There were always a few unpredictable days.

Just after two days of sun, the sky began to scowl again. Dense clouds hung overhead, darkly shrouding both near and far mountains.

Zuiju studied the sky and sighed. "Looks like another snowstorm."

Pingting leaned against the rock as she ascended the sleeping mountain slope. She was slightly panting as she silently assessed the blurry figures of people drifting far away below her. "Xiaoyang Mountain is just ahead. After that checkpoint, we'll be in Bei Mo. Worry about the snowstorm later."

Zuiju nodded.

Their initial bags had been stolen by officials while they were guests at an old couple's cabin. They no longer had any money or clothes. They would doctor the occasional sick person to earn back a little but overall, it was another additional worry on their journey. Their tender hands had been rubbed until they formed a cocoon layer.

Today they saw one of the checkpoints to get to Bei Mo, Xiaoyang Mountain. The two heaved a sigh of relief. When they got to Bei Mo, Yangfeng would surely help them settle in. The two helped support each other down from the top of the mountain. They were much more careful than setting off. After all, they had experienced countless hardships on their journey from the capital of Yun Chang to here. They quietly hid themselves in the forest trail, lurking at the edge of the road as they studied the movement on the Xiaoyang Mountain.

A few people resembling merchants led a cart, ready to pass the checkpoint. As if knowing that a snowstorm would soon come, the leader of the merchants peered at the skies anxiously. He took out a bag of coins from his arms and stuffed it into the captain of the guards. He held his hands as he begged, "Sir, look at this weather. A snowstorm is about to come, even if people can last, our livestock cannot. Please spare us and let us cross without further ado. I exit every month at least three or four times, so how could I possibly not have an approved exit pass? It's just that this checkpoint never checks for it, so today is a bit sudden..."

"So you're blaming us, eh?" The captain harrumphed. "It never used to be checked, because our superiors never told us to check. A war is going on now. A war, do ya understand? The documents are hung over there and if you're

literate enough, then read them yourself. It's clearly written. Without an approved exit pass, you cannot cross this checkpoint."

In the bushes, the two who overheard their conversation exchanged a worried glance.

"This place is just like Hemeng Mountain, only those with an approved exit pass are allowed to cross." Zuiju's face was sad, "What to do? We spent all that bitter effort rushing over from the Hemeng Mountain."

Pingting's deep black eyes stared at the narrow gap between the old doors of the Xiaoyang Mountain gate. "It seems that all of the checkpoints from Yun Chang to Bei Mo have been strictly ordered to only allow those with an approved exit pass to cross."

She should of thought of it earlier. Checkpoint inspections were bound to be strengthened when war dawned.

Yun Chang couldn't possibly allow surprise attacks from Bei Mo that would significantly injure them while caught up with the battle against Dong Lin.

"What to do?"

"No other choice." Pingting raised her head, looking at the towering mountains obscured by clouds.

This stretch of mountains separated the two countries, Yun Chang and Bei Mo. Checkpoints had been set on all of the slightly lower mountains. In the winter, the forests in the tall mountains were bitterly freezing and the animals were starving. Only madmen would attempt to cross that way.

"Miss?" Zuiju looked at her uneasily.

Pingting calmly smiled. "Since we can't get through the checkpoint, then might as well cross the Songsen Mountains."

"Such risk..." Zuiju began, "Why not stay around at the borders for a while and wait..." Her gaze rested on Pingting's belly and paused.

Pingting shook her head. "The checkpoint won't relax, it'll only get stricter. Princess Yaotian should have already hurried to the frontlines by now. He Xia will quickly realise which direction we have fled in. I know He Xia's power very well. The moment he comes back from leading the army on the battlefield, he'll immediately intervene with the border checkpoints to capture us. When that happens, we will never have another opportunity to leave Yun Chang again."

Zuiju looked at the dark Songsen Mountain forests under the heavy clouds and took a deep breath of cold air. However, she quickly calmed down. "Before we climb the mountains, I would like to pick some medicinal herbs. Mo grass, used to prevent miscarriage, is only found at the foot of mountains."

Pingting planned that by the time she had crossed the Songsen mountains, the deciding battle between Yun Chang and Dong Lin had already been dissolved by the letter Yaotian deliver.

He Xia sat on the horse, icily watching the Dong Lin's army withdraw troop by troop.

The smoke in the air dissipated.

After the tension in the string was released, only infinite loneliness and disappointment remained.

Hundreds of thousands of troops had been sent for this occasion, but suddenly the most supreme flag of Yun Chang had appeared at the battlefield. He was the highest ranking general of Yun Chang. In its history he had not known anything about this at all in advance.

Under the numerous pairs of eyes that watched, Chu Beijie and Yaotian calmly talked without a care from a carriage in the gap between the two armies.

He had watched Chu Beijie ride his horse back and heard the crisp sound of the Dong Lin army's command.

He understood everything that had happened.

"The Dong Lin army is withdrawing?"

"The Dong Lin army has withdrawn!"

From beside, from behind, every inch of the ground, from every Yun Chang soldier that had been waiting for certain death on the battlefield the rumbling sound of pleasant surprise came.

His vice general turned to him, lowering his voice as he reported, "Prince Consort, the Dong Lin army has withdrawn."

He Xia's eyes were suddenly sombre.

At that moment, he had the urge to pull his sword out of its scabbard and order attack. Both armies had approximately the same number of soldiers, but since the Dong Lin army was withdrawing, the sudden rush forwards from the other meant they were certain to gain the upper hand.

As long as they were able to rush forwards, he was sure that he could cut off Chu Beijie's head.

Hand clutching tightly to the hilt of the sword, He Xia struggled to suppress the desires that surged into his heart.

He couldn't send out the order.

Even if he pulled out his sword, the army would not listen to his orders.

Yaotian was there, and the most supreme flag of Yun Chang was waving in the sky. He was just the Prince Consort, or even just a general.

"Prince Consort, the army of Dong Lin has retreated." His vice repeated his report again, in a whisper.

He Xia's face was ashen and finally let a tiny, cold smile surface onto his face. "I see."

He smiled as his gaze watched Yaotian's carriage slowly roll towards the army. In that lonely yet elaborately decorated carriage, his wife, the master of Yun Chang, sat.

The huge army immediately silenced.

The person that had resolved the war was the sole master of Yun Chang and the only person all soldiers were loyal to – Princess Yaotian.

The carriage quietly trotted forwards before stopping quietly before the troops, the withdrawing Dong Lin army behind it. The carriage was now in front of thousands of soldiers, He Xia included.

Yaotian was sitting in the carriage. Her body had been wrapped in layers of heavy clothing, but she still felt chilling waves of unease.

After convincing Chu Beijie, she had another difficult problem to face. It seemed that He Xia's gaze pierced through the thick cloth of the carriage's window. She couldn't summon her courage to open it to face him.

Bai Pingting was no longer in the Prince Consort Residence.

Gone.

Regardless of the ten million reasons that justified this happening as good, Bai Pingting's departure remained a fact.

On the way there, she had already thought of many reasons to explain it.

Should there be a reasonable, honourable way for the master of Yun Chang to persuade with force or gentleness? Or use a woman's honesty to tell He Xia? Perhaps carry all sadness herself...

It was no use. At the last minute, all this was useless.

The carriage stood quietly where it stopped. In Yaotian's mind, only the huge figure of He Xia on his horse was in front of her.

At this time, she heard the crisp sound of a sword being unsheathed.

So crisp, so sweet, a hint of determination and resolution.

No one else had such a way of unsheathing their sword, apart from the man who had her deepest love.

Prince Consort, Prince Consort, do you hate Yaotian?

Do you want to kill me?

Yaotian closed her eyes.

He Xia stared deeply into the carriage, through the closed curtains, as he unsheathed his sword.

The sword stretched out, quivering without end. He Xia then directed it towards the sky, using all of his effort until exhausted. He roared, "Long live the Princess!"

"Long live the Princess!"

"Long live the Princess!"

"Hooray! Hooray! Long live the Princess!"

The people behind him continued his chant, their voices like thunder.

"Hooray!"

"Long live the Princess!"

On the plains, the echoes continued to roar back.

The curtain before them slowly began to lift, and a face appeared before He Xia.

“Princess.”

“Prince Consort...” Yaotian whispered back.

“Thank you, Princess.”

Yaotian stared at the handsome face that she could never have enough of and whispered, “Why thank me, Prince Consort? Prince Consort knows that I have released Bai Pingting who Prince Consort has spent so much effort in acquiring to make Dong Lin’s army withdraw.”

He Xia’s expression was the usual. He intently studied Yaotian for a while before leisurely sighing, “After this incident, I know that Princess’ love for me is true.”

“Princess Consort!” Yaotian’s tears could no longer be stopped. They poured out, not caring about the crowd. She pounced into He Xia’s warm chest. In his embrace, Yaotian cried, “Yaotian released Bai Pingting and hence betrayed Prince Consort.”

“Princess is wrong.” He Xia softly stroked his wife in his arms, whispering, “Only the woman who know true love are able to feel jealousy. To let Pingting leave alive, He Xia is...very grateful to Princess.”

Yaotian trembled slightly in He Xia’s arms. Having his broad shoulders beside her gave her unlimited courage.

He Xia’s voice was soft and warm. The flag of the Dong Lin’s army was reflected in his eyes as they moved faraway.

If Pingting went, she would not stay in Yun Chang nor return to Dong Lin.

The only direction she would go was towards Bei Mo.

On the Songsen mountains, a snowstorm was soon to arrive.

Pingting and Zuiju’s footsteps were sometimes deep, other times shallow in the snow. They kept moving upwards breathlessly.

“The snowstorm is coming.”

“Could we get to the rocky area before then?”

Pingting considered it. “I’m afraid no.”

Zuiju’s heart sank and began to feel anxious. “Then what are we to do? We’re in a forest in winter. Leafless trees are everywhere. The snow cannot be stopped anywhere, so we’ll freeze to death.” Her ten thin fingers were tightly clutched to their only bag.

They had managed to earn some money from giving medical help to a few people in the last few days. Apart from buying a regulation set of silver needles for doctors and food, they had spent the rest on warm clothing. However, even though they were wearing the thickest clothing they had, there was no chance of protecting them from lasting a snowstorm outside. Pingting raised her head, staring at the sky that had quickly been covered with heavy clouds. The snow had not begun. There was no trace of wind yet, but the shadows were brewing in the clouds.

“Zuiju, light the fire.”

“Geez, why light the fire at such a time? When the wind and snow comes, fire is no use at all.”

Pingting calmly replied, “Light the fire and boil water.” A leisurely smile surfaced on her delicate face.

Zuiju wanted to say more, but seeing the smile in Pingting’s lips made her helplessly swallow her words back down her throat. “Fine, I’ll light the fire and boil water,” she answered.

She took out the matches, a few dry branches from the forest and quickly set up a fire on the windless, snowy plains.

“Dig a hole in the snow.”

The snow was very loose and the two dug with their hands, their knees touching the ground. In a short while, their hands had already reached the mud beneath the snow. The mud had absorbed much more heat and was much more difficult to dig through than the snow.

Zuiju frowned. “It’s not deep again, let’s dig a little more.”

“No need,” Zuiju replied. “Create a small tent with the twigs.”

There was not much time left and the black clouds were swimming rapidly overhead, as if anxious to find an outlet to vent out of. A little tent had then been set up over the hole with twigs. Pingting had found many leaves and deftly scattered them over the shed.

Zuiju scrambled up to help her, her voice becoming more urgent. “This will fall with just one gust of wind. What’s the point?”

After scattering enough leaves, Pingting opened up the bag and removed the two remaining clean spare clothing. She spread it over the shelter.

“Miss, what are you doing that for?”

“Bring me the water and pour it over this.”

“It’s not boiled yet,” said Zuiju, hesitating.

Pingting was both annoyed and amused. “Melting the ice is enough. What do I need boiled water for?”

Zuiju looked at the little tent and then back at the pot of melted ice. Realisation suddenly dawned her, “Oh! Oh!” Understanding suddenly lighted up in her big eyes. “Yes, yes! I’ll bring it over.”

They poured the melted ice over the shelter, causing the clothes and the leaves that covered the shelter to absorb its moisture. Instantly, a thin layer of ice appeared on the outermost layer of clothing.

“How handy!” Zuiju happily began to laugh.

“Don’t laugh so soon, the water isn’t enough. Hurry up and get some more.”

“Yes, yes, going now.”

Moving back and forth, the fire kept melting the ice blocks.

Pot and pots kept on being poured onto the shelter. The ice on the outside became thicker and stronger.

Zuiju carried the pot, poured it over and finally asked, “Is this enough?” The water had been poured onto the top of the tent and it poured down every corner and had already been frozen into a layer ice before reaching the snowy ground.

“This snowstorm isn’t light.” Pingting studied the surging dark clouds overhead. “Melt a bit more.”

Rumble...

There were a series of muffled thunder deeply embedded in the storm clouds. A long distance seemed to have been crossed before finally reaching the ground.

On the dreary snowy plains, perhaps there was a cold breeze. Perhaps not.

Pingting’s expression suddenly changed. “Not enough time to melt more. Hurry up and hide in here. She grabbed Zuiju and the two through themselves into the little pre-made entrance. The two nested inside as there was very little room, tightly hugging onto each other.

“It’s so warm inside.” Even though they were a bit squashed, Zuiju’s sigh was still comfortable.

The wind had already begun to howl.

Half of the shed was in the snow, while the other half had a brick-like roof made of ice. It should be strong enough to help them resist the snowstorm.

Pingting and Zuiju nervously listened to the scary sounds of movement outside.

Contrarily to the outside world, the inside of the shelter was extraordinarily quiet.

“We should be able to pass through the Songsen mountains right?”

Pingting remained silent. Only after a long time did she reply, “Yes, we should.”

“Miss?”

“Hm.”

“Are you thinking about something?”

“Yeah.”

“Thinking about what?”

Pingting moved ever so slightly as slowly answered, “Zuiju, no matter how long the snowstorm goes outside, no matter how warm it is in here, we must never fall asleep. If the snow covers the entrance gap, and we’ve fallen asleep, then we will suffocate to death.”

Zuiju was indeed sleepy from the very warm environment. This news startled her. She was instantly removed of her weariness. She replied, “Understood.” She couldn’t help sigh at this though.

The shelter was very quiet. Not to mention, the two were pressed tightly to each other, so Pingting obviously heard her sigh.

“What are you sighing for?” Pingting asked

“Nothing much.”

There was silence for a brief while. Pingting softly asked, “Are you thinking that if we do end up suffocating to death here, no one will ever know of our whereabouts forever?”

Zuiju couldn’t help sighing again. “Miss Bai, why are you so clever?”

The corners of Pingting’s mouth twitched. Out of it came a bitterly twisted smile.

Another silence fell on the small tent.

Sometime later, Zuiju couldn’t help asking in a small voice, “If we really were to give our lives up on the Songsen Mountains...”

“It won’t happen.” Pingting interrupted her words, softening her voice “It won’t happen, Zuiju.”

A sour taste rose to the tip of her nose. Zuiju didn’t understand why her eyes suddenly became red. She fumbled and stretched out her hand to touch the tips of Pingting’s fingers. She clutched tightly onto her slender hand.

The two hands full of blisters, yet still dexterous, clenched together in the darkness.

In the quiet world, Zuiju’s breathing suddenly stopped.

The breathing that had abruptly stopped was highly unusual. Pingting waited quietly while Zuiju made no movement on her wrist, as if waiting quietly too.

After a long time had passed, Zuiju released her held breath. The breathing that floated towards Pingting’s ears seemed more anxious than before.

“Miss Bai, your pulse is...very weak.” Zuiju’s voice was also anxious. “I must immediately treat you with acupuncture.”

“No need to hurry, Zuiju.” Pingting lightly replied.

“No, it must be done immediately.” Zuiju habitually reached out her hand to look for the bag which knocked into the hardened wall of the shelter, making it feel sore.

Where was the bag?

Zuiju suddenly stiffened.

“We came in a rush.” In the darkness, Pingting’s voice was very soft and collected. “Zuiju, the bag is still outside. Remember? It’s left where I took out the spare clothing.”

The snow furiously pounded against the solid roof, producing a terrifying sound.

The deathly silence inside and the raging howl of the wind outside were two very different worlds.

A light flashed in the dark depths of Zuiju’s eyes. She did not hesitate long before she clenched her teeth. “I will get it back, it should be nearby. I’ll grab it the moment I move out.”

“No ” Pingting lightly spat out a word

Zuiju suddenly realised that Pingting had positioned herself to fully block the entrance. There was no way she could wriggle her way out.

“Miss Bai, I understand your concern, but I must bring the needles back.” Zuiju lowered her voice. “I am a doctor.”

In the darkness, the outline of Pingting’s figure seemed hazy, as if the dull world had blended into her. Yet her fragile body was as dignified and stable as a mountain.

“Zuiju, do you even know where the needles are? No one knows where it has been hurled to by the wind after a snowstorm has started.”

“Perhaps it has been caught in a nearby branch. I can still go to look for it.” She continued forwards and collided into Pingting’s arms. Her fingers slipped around her wrist and finally onto her hand, “Miss Bai, like I said before, that I will do everything to protect you and your child.”

Pingting’s body refused to budge. She stood there like a statue of thousands of years. Her hand returned the tight grasp of Zuiju’s hand.

“I’ve also said before that we won’t die. It won’t happen, Zuiju.”

The two freezing, slender hands tightly held each other, causing the slight warmth from being bonded to slowly rise.

The space in the shed was much too small. Zuiju could only push Pingting away.

“But, your child...” Zuiju’s heard her own voice, carrying a low sob, in the pitch black darkness. She loosened her clenched hand and used her fingertips to explore Pingting’s pulse once more.

After detecting a disordered skin, she lifted her slightly trembling fingers.

A warm liquid dripped onto her skirt.

In the silent darkness, the sound of her teardrops falling was heard very clearly.

Needles, how could she have forgotten the most important needles?

On the journey, she had continuously used medicinal herbs as well as needles to strengthen Pingting’s body and stabilise her pulse. Why had she forgotten them when the snowstorm was about to fall?

Where was the roaring storm outside going to blow the bag with the needles to?

Zuiju could never forget this cruel storm in her life.

“Don’t worry, the child will be fine.”

Had she heard wrong?

In Pingting’s voice, there was a deep sense of gentleness and calmness.

Zuiju felt the messy pulse on her wrist. There calm, faint words were like needles stabbing at Zuiju’s heart.

In the darkness, she heard Pingting stifling a chuckle, her voice as gentle as a sweet dream. “The child in my belly is obediently sleeping. I am his mother and will protect him. The storm is fierce but he is in me, very warm and very safe.”

Hearing Pingting’s voice, Zuiju could almost see the corners of her mouth lifting into a small smile.

Gentle and touching, like the first rain of spring.

Pingting was indeed smiling.

The worst imperfections always came at the most terrible moments.

In the snowstorm, she had remembered the bag and in it, the needles. At the same time, she knew there was no going back. The roaring storm on the snowy plains was not only good at grabbing bags, but also grabbing away the lives of living people.

She knew her pulse was chaotic.

Her head was a little dizzy and her eyes were blurred. She did not know whether it was the darkness or some other reason. Her energy seemed to be pumped away, whisp by whisp.

But even so, she had to smile more.

“Don’t worry about my child and me, Zuiju. We’ll get through this snow.”

Although this child is young, he is not as fragile as you think.

He was conceived in winter.

In his mother’s womb, he could feel the peace of the secluded residence, hear the qin sound that touched the four countries, admired the heartbreakingly bright moon. He had seen the fire that raged in the night sky, the snowy ground died red from fresh blood, as well as boarded the carriage with his mother to leave, full of despair and sorrow.

This child will be stronger than me, more courageous.

His father is the world-famous general, the never to be defeated Duke of Zhen-Bei.

In his veins, the blood of Chu Beijie flows.

The most powerful blood of this world.

Chapter 46

In the early morning, orange light filtered through the thick layers of clouds, causing a little haziness.

The sound of hooves shattered the tranquillity as it hurried on the snow-covered path.

Bada, bada, bada bump...

A horse came from afar and the military flag of emergencies had been placed on its back to ensure it was untampered on its journey.

“Open the door! Hurry, open the city gates! The Dong Lin army has withdrawn! The Dong Lin army has withdrawn!”

The messenger had his head raised as he yelled at the closed gates, excited joy hung in his words despite his fatigue.

The guards at the city gates strained their ears in disbelief. They peered down, asking incredulously, “What did you just say, Bro?”

“Hurry up and open the gates! I’ve got to report it to the Senior Official. Dong Lin has withdrawn!”

“The Dong Lin army has withdrawn! Dong Lin has withdrawn! The war is over!”

The heavy city gates emitted a deep rumbling sound as they slowly opened. The news of the Dong Lin army’s withdrawal seemed to have acquired wings as it swept through the air of the capital of Yun Chang, sweeping the unease from everyone’s heart.

“Senior Official, Senior Official! The army of Dong Lin has withdrawn!”

Although he had long mentally prepared for himself, the elderly and experienced Gui Changqing couldn’t help abruptly sitting up from his bed. “Have they really withdrawn?”

“Yes, the Princess herself went to bargain with Chu Beijie, and soon after, the Dong Lin army withdrew.” The messenger was kneeling as he clearly and simply reported the events. “My army has sent out a significant amount of spies to closely monitor the trends in the Dong Lin army’s movement. There is nothing strange at all. They really are withdrawing.”

Gui Changqing dressed in the clothes that his servants had brought forth while asking, “Where is the Princess and the Prince Consort?”

“The Princess and Prince Consort are currently on the way, leading the troops back to the capital.”

“We must prepare a grand welcome.” Gui Changqing turned back, his expression full of delight. “Go, get the Official of Public Events to come here immediately, as well as all those officials in charge of procurement, ceremonies and entertainment. Wait...” He thought for a while before continuing his ordering, “In this battle between Dong Lin and Yun Chang, there were still a number of sons of Yun Chang that were injured or killed. Bring the official of military affairs, so we may talk about pensions and such.”

The manservant, who was to pass on the message hurriedly nodded, wrote them down, and turned to go.

Rumble rumble rumble!

A few rumbling, booming sounds came, shaking the dust from the corners of the roof. All of the people in the room were shocked by this and even Gui Changqing’s expression changed. “What on earth has happened in the capital? Go check!”

Not long later, the manservant quickly returned from task. “Report to Senior Official, the news of the Dong Lin army’s withdrawal has reached the capital. Everyone is awake and is drinking, singing and dancing on the streets. Firecrackers have been lit everywhere and the biggest firepowder shop in the capital has taken out the most precious, biggest firecracker of the capital. Those sounds just then were from that. Would Senior Official like to arrest them?”

Gui Changqing understood the moment he heard his words. He shook his head. “Arrest them for what reason? Who doesn’t have sons or younger brothers in the army? Now that the war is over, the peasants are happy, meaning that our worries can finally be put to rest too.” He then ordered, “Someone go and take out one thousand and two hundred silver coins to buy alcohol. Put it all out in the square at front of the Royal Residence so the peasants may take them freely.”

His servants laughed. “Senior Official, the cellar and warehouse of the Royal Residence is full to the brim. There is no need to use silver coins to buy alcohol from the peasants.”

“Those are all for when the Princess and Prince Consort return to the Royal Residence. I’m afraid our warehouse will not have enough for all those generals and soldiers. Such delightful news!” Thinking of war meant a significant loss to his country, yet there were no significant casualties in the end. Gui Changqing was extremely content. Gui Changqing had contributed to Yun Chang’s constant policy of no attack over the years.

Not long later, the messenger he had first sent out hurried back, report, “The Officials have been welcomed here and are currently waiting for Senior Official in the atrium.”

“Okay.” Gui Changqing quickly tidied his grand robes once more before stepping outside the door.

He took the main trail through the Senior Official Residence, bypassing the garden and planning continue to the atrium straight ahead. Happy, his steady pace became lighter. When he arrived by the pond with a thin layer of ice on top, he suddenly heard a familiar voice of his messenger straining his voice as he shouted, “Report! Emergency report from the army! Report!” The voice came closer as the person who yelled desperately hurried towards him.

Gui Changqing’s heart throbbed once.

Dong Lin’s army had already withdrawn, what other urgent news could the frontlines bring?

Had the situation changed?

“You can go,” said Gui Changqing, turning back to the servants behind him.

The messenger had already arrived before his eyes as he turned.

Gui Changqing stopped moving on the steps leading to a bridge. He lowered his voice, asking, “Perhaps the Dong Lin army feined withdrawal?”

This messenger had just gotten off the horse and had been puffing as he ran. He shook his head, “No, I am not from the frontlines.”

“Oh?” Gui Changqing’s anxiety cooled down slightly, “Say what news you bring then.”

“Report to Senior Official, the checkpoints on the way from my Yun Chang to Bei Mo keeps on being breached.”

“Checkpoints at Tonglin, Hemeng, Xiaoyang, Yunliao Mountains have all been breached. The intruder is not a soldier from Bei Mo but a man who comes from the direction of my Yun Chang.”

Gui Changqing asked in surprised, “A man?”

“Yes.” Even the messenger’s face was full of disbelief. “With just a horse, he consecutively breached four of Yun Chang’s checkpoints. The man came as a surprise. His skill with swords is very good. Because of the battle with Dong Lin, most of the elite level soldiers once placed on the checkpoints were deployed at the frontlines, so the remaining ones don’t dare to oppose this man.”

Gui Changqing thought for a moment, then asked, “General Chang is in one of the nearby towns. Had he not heard about this?”

“General Chang’s elite soldiers were also taken away by the Prince Consort. When he heard about this, he immediately dispatched all of his remaining men to crush this person. However, this man is too powerful and elusive. He appears to specialise in hiding his tracks by only appearing when there are less people at a checkpoint. He comes and goes calmly so when the main unit arrives, his shadows are long gone. General Chang couldn’t do anything about him, so he could only order the closure of all checkpoints to prevent them from being breached again.”

“Seeing how he has breached four checkpoints consecutively, it seems that it isn’t to reach Bei Mo.”

“No. It seems that every time that person breaches a checkpoint, he will always grab the leader asking the whereabouts of a woman. He always has a portrait in his hands, one of a woman. He only asks whether the people of every checkpoint whether they have seen that woman before and if they knew the direction she went. This person is very brave and well-built. If a normal person is placed before him—not just his sword—just the gaze is enough to chill their hearts.”

Gui Changqing already had some clue of what was happening by now. He smiled instead, “Do you know who this person is?”

The messenger was surprised and asked, “This man always wears a black mask, obscuring his face. Only his eyes show. How could Senior Official know who he is?”

The corners of Gui Changqing’s lifted into a knowing smile. He held his hands behind his back as gazed up at the brightening sky. He sighed, lamenting, “Who else apart from him? He is no other than Chu Beijie.”

The news of Dong Lin army’s withdrawal had only just reached the capital, but Chu Beijie had already breached four checkpoints. It was a truly outrageous speed.

He must’ve set off alone immediately issuing the withdrawal order.

Chu Beijie’s anxiety was evident.

“Dong Lin’s Duke of Zhen-Bei?” The messenger was taken aback, his wide eyes stared for a long time before he exhaling. He shook his head, “No wonder, he’s so strong. I will leave the capital tonight and pass on this important news to General Chang.”

Military news were very important to the country. Only the very loyal and intelligent soldiers were allowed to be messengers. Their minds were many times much more flexible than ordinary soldiers.

The messenger was slightly hesitant before he continued, “I boldly make the statement that because Dong Lin’s Duke of Zhen-Bei led troops to attack my Yun Chang, he is the enemy of my Yun Chang. Now that he alone is in Yun Chang’s borders, this is a wonderful opportunity to eradicate this person.”

Gui Changqing had long thought about this. However, Chu Beijie was the worry of the other three countries too. No one wanted to touch him. Chu Beijie alone on his horse, going in and out of Yun Chang, was like an elaborately made, warm dessert placed in front of starving people. Although Gui Chang was wise and old, he struggled hard to restrain himself from the idea of immediately ordering the troops to capture Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie would not be easy to capture.

In the snow-capped Songsen mountains, getting the army to surround a well-hidden famous general was an impossibly difficult thing to do.

It was difficult to capture a person like Chu Beijie and even harder to find a good chance.

Not to mention...

“What use is it even if the army is mobilised and kill Chu Beijie in one fell swoop?” Gui Changqing smiled bitterly as he shook his head, reluctantly letting go of this enticing idea. “If the news were to spread, the withdrawing Dong Lin army will immediately rush forwards. This time, they will undoubtedly battle until the very last soldier stands.”

This peace they had worked so hard on would be destroyed in a single moment.

This was something that Gui Changqing did not want to see at all.

The messenger had long heard of Chu Beijie’s fame and understood that Gui Changqing’s words were correct. He couldn’t continue to be bold and knelt down. “Messenger will leave the capital tonight. Does Senior Official have any other instructions?”

“Pass this message onto General Chang. Two things. One, don’t send any more troops to surround or attack Chu Beijie. This man is extremely aggressive and courageous. He is impossible to kill and will result in meaningless casualties amongst my Yun Chang’s soldiers. Not to mention, the war has only just finished so no need to further anger an enemy general. As for the checkpoints, he is only looking for a person, not intending to harm, so there is no need for resistance. Second...” Gui Changqing hesitated for a moment, the light in his eyes flashed. He lowered his voice, “Tell all the people at the checkpoints that no matter what, they mustn’t let Chu Beijie meet that woman.”

“Yes.”

“Remember the second in your heart.”

“Yes, I understand.”

Gui Changqing watched him, unsatisfied, as he began to depart. His eyes uneasily swept across his surroundings. There was an empty lake beside him, a bridge covered with snow in front where no one could hide without being noticed. Gui Changqing asked the messenger again, “Are you familiar with the Songsen Mountains?”

“I have always been stationed on the Songsen Mountains and is very familiar with the terrain shape of the Songsen Mountains.”

“What is your name and what is your job title in the army?”

“Report to Senior Official. My name is Fanlu and is a Vice-General.”

“I will now raise you to Valiant General.”

“Eh?” Fanlu looked up, stunned. He realised from Gui Changqing’s serious expression that it was not a joke. His eyes brightened as he loudly replied, “Thank you, Senior Official! I will definitely do my best to repay Senior Official.”

Gui Changqing stepped down the stairs, helping him up as he whispered, “I have a third message, one only for you to hear. It shall come out of my mouth and only enter your ears.”

“Yes.” Fanlu sternly replied, his voice lowered as he turned his ears towards Gui Changqing.

“That woman may be around the Songsen Mountains and must never be reunited with Chu Beijie. You must find her quicker than Chu Beijie.”

“Kill her?”

“No,” Gui Changqing replied in a whisper, “no marks on her body that indicates a death due to humans.”

The cruel light that only soldiers glinted in Fanlu’s eyes. “There are wild beasts out there throughout the year. I know what to do.”

“Have you seen her drawing?”

“No, the drawing has only been seen by the guards Chu Beijie grabbed. However, there are very few women who dare to walk around on the Songsen Mountains.”

“Remember, she has a luminous jade hairpin on herself. That was the only ornament that never left her side since her departure from Dong Lin to Yun Chang.

Zuiju had forgotten how long she had waited in the darkness. Every minute, every second tugged at her heart. The suffering from it had already continued a few rounds in the darkness. She lightly held Pingting’s wrist, refusing to let go of it. It seemed that if she did, she would forever lose Pingting’s whereabouts. The air rumbled with the two’s breathing.

Dear God, please protect Miss Pingting and her child through this obstacle.

She felt a wetness on her face. The tears that came down filtered into her skin.

“When will the storm be over?” Zuiju tried very hard to make those words a little calmer, without making a tearful voice.

“Perhaps it’ll stop soon,” Pingting replied softly.

The calmer she was, the more chaotic Zuiju’s heart was. After an awkward silence, Zuiju’s voice was heard again. “I really hate the Duke,” she whispered.

“Zuiju.”

“I hate the Duke to death, hate him.” Zuiju had her teeth clenched and grinded them.

She could only blame him and could only hate him. Why, when he had such great abilities, did the woman he love suffer like this?

“It’s all the Duke’s fault. It’s all his fault. Aren’t men supposed to protect women? Should the woman they love not be protected in the palm of their hand?” The more she thought, the angrier she became. The more she spoke, the more agitated she became.

Pingting sighed once and took Zuiju’s hand in hers. She stroked it, calming her down. “Zuiju, don’t say any more.”

“He should be here. It’d be great if he was the one here with you.”

The words that should’ve never been said came flooding out, rapidly bringing a silence to the narrow space. Zuiju only suddenly realised that she must have been driven crazy by the darkness and the storm outside

Chu Beijie, if Chu Beijie were here, then what was this storm? His shoulders were very broad and could shield Pingting from the harsh weather.

“Miss, I...” Zuiju secretly regretted it. “I shouldn’t’ve mentioned him.”

“You’re right.” Pingting sadly replied. “It would be great if he were here.”

It would indeed be great if they could not be parted, even if the highest power tried to tear them apart.

The storm hid the daylight. The Songsen Mountains had become a patch of gloomy white. The wind began to howl, hitting hard against the rocky cliffs, producing a sharp whistling sound of dissatisfaction.

Chu Beijie sat in a gap between the rocks, stroking the precious sword in his hands.

He had spent almost all his life marching to war and seen storms a hundred times more terrible than this one. He had immediately secured the most sturdy cave against the storm upon entering the mountains.

The storm held no place in his heart. He silently waited for it to pass. Once the wind stopped, he would immediately go down the mountain and attempt to cross the Suyang checkpoint again.

Suyang was the weakest defended checkpoint of Yun Chang. If Pingting wanted to go to Bei Mo, she would most likely choose to cross there.

Perhaps Pingting would cross the Suyang checkpoint today.

But what if today was still without result? The depths of Chu Beijie’s eyes began to dim even more.

In these past few days, he had consecutively breached four of Yun Chang’s checkpoints but no one at all of them had seen Pingting before. Could it be that Pingting hadn’t headed for Bei Mo?

This made him feel very worried. If she stayed in Yun Chang, then even if Princess Yaotian was willing to free Pingting, He Xia would most likely not. He Xia would send out pursuing soldiers and perhaps arrive in a day or two.

Deafening thunder came from the sky, and the blood red lightning seemed to strike Chu Beijie’s heart, piercing a gaping wound in his chest that caused everything that flowed out to plummet into the endless darkness. His body felt empty, except for the anxiety and distress that filled his heart.

Pingting, where are you?

Are you and our child in the mountains, in the snowstorm, somewhere on the bumpy road?

I only want to put my arms tightly around you, my body blocking yours from the howling snow.

If you allow me to do that much, I will be the happiest man most beloved by the gods.

“Where are you? Where on earth are you?” Chu Beijie gazed at the scabbard. The flowery pattern on it reminded him of the golden hairpins that swayed on Pingting’s hair.

At that moment, he deeply desired to feel Pingting’s warmth, to look at her calm, demure smile once more.

The howling of the wind began to fade. The earth had darkened, unlike before, indicating the prelude to the end of the snowstorm.

Chu Beijie's expression jolted. He suddenly lurched upwards.

If he was unable to find any news on the Suyang checkpoint, then it meant that Pingting had already found another way to go to Bei Mo.

And he would not hesitate going towards Bei Mo.

Even if he travelled to the end of the world, he had to find Pingting.

Zuiju almost thought she wouldn't be able to last to the end of the snowstorm. She had prayed and begged to the heavens in all sorts of ways and although Pingting's pulse remained unstable, at least it didn't get worse.

"It seems the snowstorm is about to end."

In the darkness, she heard Pingting sigh in what seemed to be relief. "Really?" She had been sitting up with a straight spine the a longest time. It suddenly gave way like an exhausted man that had struggled with his last breath until he collapsed, reaching his destination.

"Miss!" Zuiju cried in panic.

Pingting barely managed to hold herself up. "Don't worry." Her tone was very weak.

Zuiju stretched out a hand, wiping away a forehead of cold sweat. "Does your chest feel stuffy?"

"Yeah," uttered Pingting.

"The snow is about to stop."

Pingting gently twisted her body a bit and revealed the entrance. Water had not been poured over it, so it had not formed part of the solid ice block. A corner of the clothing on the roof had fallen over the entrance. It was full of frozen condensation from the snowstorm. Pingting forcefully pushed at it, but the clothing and ice did not make even the slightest sound. After another push, a little light began to stream inside. Although it was just a little light, it was much more than the complete darkness before. Zuiju and Pingting instantly shivered twice.

It was indeed cold, but the snow had almost stopped. The fierce sound of snapping twigs in the wind gradually quietened down. Finally, they completely opened the entrance and wriggled outside.

The tent of ice, that had protected them through the catastrophe, gleamed crystal clear under the sun. It was so small that it was difficult to imagine that it had allowed two adults to escape the snowstorm.

The cold air flooded into their noses, bringing in the freshness unique smell of the mountain forests. They had somehow managed to survive and see the light before them, the meaning of life valued more to them. Their spirits quickly brightened.

"Miss, let's continue on our way."

"Sure."

"Allow me to check your pulse again. Does your chest still feel stuffy?"

Pingting shook her head. "It's better."

Zuiju studied her, hesitating for a moment.

Pingting was right. The snow broke a whole tree trunk, not to mention the bag which blew to somewhere far away long ago. They no longer had needles or herbs prepared before climbing the mountain.

Zuiju worriedly asked, "Should we still continue?"

"Yeah."

"I hope God continues to bless us and let us find some herbs. Without silver needles, pine needles can do the trick for now." Zuiju then continued, "You sit here for a while. I'll go look for some pine needles. After a few pricks, you'll be able to endure your uncomfortableness for a little longer."

Chapter 47

The Royal Residence of Dong Lin.

"Good news! Good news, my King!"

The Senior Official Chu Zairan was holding an army report and was practically running into the Royal Residence. His excited shouts were heard before he even entered the room.

The King of Dong Lin had been ill for several days and constantly felt groggy. The Queen was by the bed, personally attending the King of Dong Lin. She heard the shouts and happened to turn to see Chu Zairan stumble inside. "What good news?"

"Madam, the Duke of Zhen-Bei has withdrawn the army. The final battle did not start."

The Queen was stunned by this. She hesitated for the longest time before asking in utter disbelief, "The Duke of Zhen-Bei didn't go to war with the army of Yun Chang?"

Chu Zairan's hand that held the army report shook and quivered constantly with excitement. "Nearly. I heard, when the two armies were ready to confront each other, the Princess of Yun Chang suddenly appeared and convinced the Duke of Zhen-Bei to withdraw. Madam, several hundred thousands of lives of Dong Lin's sons have been saved!"

"Repeat what you just said," said a man's frail voice from the bed.

"Ah, King! Are you awake?" The Queen was taken aback and hurriedly supported the struggling King of Dong Lin to sit up. "Be careful, King. The physician said you must heal in peace."

The King of Dong Lin's hand feebly waved a hand to dismiss the idea. He turned his gaze towards Chu Zairan. "Senior Official, please say that again. What did the Duke of Zhen-Bei do?"

"Replying to King, the Duke of Zhen-Bei has withdrawn the army. The army and Yun Chang did not begin the deciding battle." Although Chu Zairan was very old, he had a lot of vigour to spare.

“Oh?” The King of Dong Lin chewed on Chu Zairan’s words as if still unable to accept this incredible news. His eyes were a little yellow from his sickness, giving a different quality to his eyes which then blended into his excited expression. Hand resting on the shoulder of the Queen, he peered forwards asking, “Where is the report? Hurry, let me see.”

Chu Zairan hurriedly passed over the report with both hands.

The Queen was incredibly worried about the King of Dong Lin overexerting himself. She personally helped him open the report. The King read it while leaning against a pillow.

The King of Dong Lin read the report twice before sighing in relief. He thought his body felt breezy, the sour pain and stuffiness felt in the previous days seemed to have flown off. He passed it over to the Queen, who closed the report, before smiling. “I know what Brother, Brother still thinks about the overall situation...cough cough cough...cough...” He suddenly began to continuously cough.

The Queen hurriedly massaged his back to increase airflow. She softened her voice, “You must be more aware of your body, King. The war is over, and the Duke of Zhen-Bei has stopped his craze. As long as King’s body gets better, then it is truly a blessing for all peasants of Dong Lin.”

The King of Dong Lin struggled to bit back his pain. He took a few deep breaths before asking, “Where is the army right now?”

“They are currently on the way back. The Duke of Zhen-Bei has given his order that when they get to the border, all are to disband and to immediately go back to their original stations.”

The King of Dong Lin considered this for a moment, before commanding, “Write a letter, Senior Official, and send it to the Duke of Zhen-Bei with a fast horse. Tell him that the previous letters I sent him were all words written in a fit of anger. The Royal House of Dong Lin only has us two brothers, and I still have a lot of hope for him. Tell him to come back as soon as possible and to never leave the capital again.”

Chu Zairan hesitated before stepping forward to report in a whisper, “King, the Duke of Zhen-Bei is no longer with the army. The army is currently led by Official Chen-Mu.”

The King and the Queen of Dong Lin were slightly surprised.

“No longer with the army?” The King of Dong Lin’s eyebrows that had just begun to relax, screwed up tightly again. He barely managed to sit up. “What’s this all about?”

“The general who passed on the messenger said that after the Duke of Zhen-Bei sent the order to withdraw, he passed the flag of command to Chen Mu. He then rode off alone, and his whereabouts are currently unknown.”

The clear skies that had just come out were suddenly covered up by rain clouds again. The King of Dong Lin sighed, flopped backwards and lethargically leaned on the head of the bed.

“Any news of Bai Pingting?” The Queen interrupted with a question.

“Bai Pingting’s whereabouts are currently unknown. There’s something else though...” Chu Zairan raised his eyes to study the King of Dong Lin’s expression and stopped.

“Go ahead and speak, Senior Official.”

“This...this is just a rumour, not confirmed.” Chu Zairan hunched over as he carefully proceeded, “It seems that when Bai Pingting was taken away by He Xia she was already...”

The Queen was secretly alarmed by this and she hurriedly asked, “Already what?”

“...Already with the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s flesh and blood.”

When this came out, not only was the Queen but also the King was shocked. “Is this true?”

“King, this is just a rumour...”

“The blood of my Royal House of Dong Lin was sent into He Xia’s hands?” The King of Dong Lin’s eyes were wide in anger. His breath suddenly got caught in his throat, sending him off with another fit of coughing.

The Queen’s heart felt completely frozen into blocks of ice. She clumsily helped to clear the King of Dong Lin’s airflow, tears already beginning to fall. Seeing the King of Dong Lin had stopped coughing, she stood up and slumped to her knees, crying, “King, it’s all my fault! This is a result of my sins.”

The King of Dong Lin was stiff for a long time. He heaved a sigh. “Queen is not at fault; it is mine. This is such a joke from the gods, my House of Dong Lin has finally had a seedling yet...Senior Official.”

“Here.”

“Immediately write an Order and send people to find Bai Pingting. She must be protected and the child in her belly.” The King of Dong Lin then slowly added, “When she is found, tell her that as long as she gives birth to Brother’s son, then I shall bestow her the title, Duchess of Zhen-Bei.”

His body was not like before. After Dong Lin lost their two princes, the only people eligible to inherit the throne were the Duke of Zhen-Bei and his heirs.

The Songsen Mountains continuously ran for several hundred miles. Winter withered things, but luckily pine trees were not afraid of the cold. Zuiju had been collecting pine needles to use for acupuncture for Pingting while travelling. The treatment barely allowed Pingting to summon enough energy to continue on their journey.

The two people knew their prayers to the skies were unanswered. Prayers to the earth were ineffective. They could only use their own effort to pave their way to survival. Although it was hard, they had swallowed it all back and never once said it was tiring.

Sometimes Pingting’s pulse was good, the other times bad. The gleaming white of the forest and mountains stretched on, boundless, into the horizon. The road seemed to be growing longer day by day. The two had lost their way several times in the mountain forest. They had gone around in circles until they finally found the right direction with great difficulty.

Pingting’s legs gradually grew powerless. It seemed one step was even more tiring than ten steps. She knew she couldn’t last much longer but was afraid to drag behind Zuiju, so she didn’t say anything.

On this particular afternoon, they finally reached a rocky area. The Songsen mountain rocky areas grew unique berries that could bear fruit even in winter. Although it wasn’t delicious, it was undoubtedly good food for the two.

“Please sit down Miss. I’ll go get some for us to eat.” Zuiju helped Pingting to sit down. No much later, she brought a pile of red-purple berries tied with her skirt. The branches of the berries were dense and with pricks, causing a number of fresh wounds on her hand.

They had been subjected to worse suffering along the way, so Zuiju wasn't concerned at all. She placed the berries before Pingting, and the two took advantage of the rare warm sun to fill their stomachs.

"We've almost crossed the Songsen Mountains right?"

"Yeah."

"My, we're almost at the end. When your child is born in the future, we must tell him each and every of these hardships in much detail. We have to let him know that his mother had worked very hard to..." Zuiju said this while turning to peek at Pingting.

Pingting sat cross-legged and leaned back against the rock. Her face had a very faint expression on it, causing Zuiju to suddenly feel uneasy.

"Miss?" She whispered, trying to wake her. She knelt down, "Miss Bai?"

"Hm?" Pingting moved a little, her eyes slightly opened. The corners of her mouth twitched upwards. "Zuiju..."

Zuiju began to feel very nervous. "What's wrong, Miss Bai?" She hurriedly checked Pingting's pulse.

Pingting struggled free and slowly shook her head.

She beckoned Zuiju to come a little closer, until her ear was almost touching, before softly whispering, "The Songsen Mountains cuts through both Yun Chang and Bei Mo. If you go down here, you will soon reach within the Bei Mo borders. Yangfeng and Ze Yin's secluded residence is on the other side of the Songsen Mountains. You go..."

"No!" Zuiju uttered a cry, staring back at the blank expression. "Miss, what are you saying? We go together. We're nearly there, we're so close. Look, I found some herbs and will boil some medicine for you. And...and I have needles, I've harvested some fresh pine needles. All of them are hard enough."

"Zuiju..."

"No! No!"

Pingting was always calm and collected. This time, she seemed helplessly weak.

"Zuiju, I really can't go on any more. If it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't've been able to walk for a long time." A bitter smile played on Pingting's lips.

Zuiju stared at her, feeling a child on her back. She turned around and studied her surroundings.

The pristine patches of white seemed particularly terrifying today.

"Miss..." Zuiju's lips were quivering. She felt a strong sense of apprehension which seemed to drown out all of her surroundings, overwhelming her.

"I can only rely on you now. Here is a map, go find Yangfeng." Pingting lightly bit down on her lip, trying hard to pull out the map hidden in her arms. "Ze Yin is a general. He must have warriors accustomed to mountain areas. When you see him, ask him to immediately send someone to pick me up."

Zuiju shook her head. "If you can't walk, I can carry you. I still have energy..."

“That will only make us die together. We don’t have enough food and I’m afraid there might not be any more rocky areas ahead. You still have energy. If you go ahead by yourself, you should be able to get down in two days. Ze Yin’s men are used to fighting in the wilderness. Perhaps they will be able to find this place in a day.”

“No, it really won’t do.”

Pingting’s two eyes stared, her voice a little louder. “If you carry me, you still won’t be able to leave this mountain in ten days.” She didn’t have much energy left. She was drained. Her chest began to hurt. She raised her head, panting continuously. She stuffed the map into Zuiju’s hands, “Take it!”

Zuiju took the map, her heart full of panic.

She knew Pingting had come to a dead end. If Pingting had even the slightest idea, she would never willingly stop her footsteps.

She just never thought the two would part.

“Go find Yangfeng and tell her to send the best men to find me. Coming back and forth will only take two days.” Pingting looked around her, “This rocky area has places to shelter me from the wind and rain, as well as berries for food. I’ll wait there.”

Zuiju clutched onto the map.

All of her body’s strength seemed to be concentrated at her hand. The wrinkled map seemed to be almost crushed by her.

“Understood.” As if separated by a century, Zuiju finally found her shattered voice. She stared deeply at Pingting, “I will hurry to Yangfeng’s and get her to tell him to send his mountaineering experts with the best ginseng. I’ll do some preparations over there, so they’ll be ready when you arrive.”

Pingting gently gazed back at her, her pale lips curved slightly. She smiled, “Yes, that’s the way.” She then raised a hand and reached out for the hairpin on her head, her arm trembling for a long time. However, it kept being a little out of reach. She was unable to get it.

This left a sourness in Zuiju’s heart as she saw this. She helped her get the hairpin off her head and handed it to her.

Pingting didn’t take it back and said, “You take it. This is what Yangfeng gave me and should act as proof.”

Zuiju answered. For a long time, there was no movement from her, only two eyes studying Pingting.

Pingting knew she was still worried and coughed once. “Zuiju.”

“Hm.”

“Go.”

Zuiju answered. There was a slight sob in her voice. She slowly got up, her hand clutching onto the map and the luminous jade hairpin in the other. “Miss, I will go now.” She hesitated for a long time and finally turned to leave.

Pingting watched her with open eyes, seeing her back view slowly disappear beyond the rocky area. She sighed in relief. She then considered struggling upwards to walk around and study the terrain but couldn’t find any energy at all. She then thought about resting since she no longer had to hurry their journey. Pingting closed her eyes, her head against the rocks. Not long later, Pingting opened her eyes surprisedly after hearing the sound of footsteps on her

“Miss,” Zuiju had returned, her hands full of berries. “I’ll give you this.” She carefully placed the berries in front of Pingting and stood up. She looked at Pingting for some time, before softly replying, “I really shall go this time.”

“Zuiju,” Pingting saw her back view, and couldn’t help saying her name.

Zuiju hurriedly turned back towards her. “What’s wrong?”

Pingting’s clear eyes studied her for a long time, before smiling. “Nothing much, you must be careful. The sooner you get down the mountain, the sooner you can relax.”

“Hm, understood.” Zuiju nodded her head.

This time, she really went.

The imminent war had suddenly been prevented by a private conversation between the Princess of Yun Chang and Chu Beijie. All had expected to see rivers of blood flow but it was suddenly stopped. The people who thought they had miscalculated the most were the masters of the other two countries.

They were also thinking of the time when the House of Jing-An’s rise to fame, firmly grasping onto the military power as well as the King’s favour. The King of Gui Le, He Su, barely sat on the throne for a year yet immediately framed He Xia for a revolt by tricking him into the Royal Residence the day of his triumphant return.

Under such a rich scheme, the Ducal House of over hundred years of history was ruined in a single moment.

How could He Xia forget such hate?

When hearing Chu Beijie had assembled the Dong Lin army and was about to fight against the Prince Consort for a final, decisive battle to death, the King of Gui Le anticipated the event with such great joy and delight. It was too difficult to describe his excitement in words.

The army of Gui Le had been put on standby. The moment He Xia was defeated, Gui Le would immediately join the war and break through Yun Chang’s checkpoints. Then, they would strike through to He Xia, the man who the King of Gui Le so bitterly detested, in one go.

Who knew that the Princess of Yun Chang would appear and completely destroy every single battle plan they had.

“It’s not Princess Yaotian.” The King of Gui Le got off the throne, stretching his muscles. He had already listened to army reports for half the day and finally dismissively added a few words of his own.

“King?” Le Di, an Elder Statesman, asked in surprise. “Is King saying that this report is wrong?”

“No, I’m saying that Princess Yaotian was not the one who made Chu Beijie withdraw his troops.” The King of Gui Le raised his head towards the sky to sigh heavily. His expression seemed to have an unwilling loneliness in its depths. “It was Bai Pingting.”

Le Di’s expression slightly changed. “Bai Pingting? Bai Pingting of the Jing-An Ducal Residence?”

Why did he always hear that name? She was just a maid of a Ducal Residence. She could play a few songs on the guqin, yet why was she directing the overall situation today?

Even the Queen had mentioned her name in their private conversation

“Elder Statesman must think this is unbelievable too. Chu Beijie is a hero but launched a war for a mere woman. Then again, a mere woman stopped the battle. Now that I think about it, the fates of Yun Chang and Dong Lin, appear to rest in the hands of this one woman.”

Le Di disagreed, “King is over worrying. Women should properly stay in their homes, thinking about serving their husband and father. Chu Beijie is utterly stupid to do such things for a woman and such thinking is very misguided. He once led his troops and violated my Gui Le’s soil. Now that he is self-destructing, it is truly the greatest joy of my Gui Le.”

The King of Gui Le looked at the messenger that stood aside, not knowing what to say. The corners of his mouth suddenly rose. He may have been smiling but perhaps not. “Let me tell Elder Statesman something interesting. When Bai Pingting was taken by He Xia out of Dong Lin to Yun Chang, I sent troops to ambush them in Dong Lin, hoping to bring Bai Pingting back to Gui Le.”

“Ah?” Le Di was slightly shocked by this.

“I did not discuss this with Elder Statesman because I knew that Elder Statesman would never agree.” From the side, the King’s face revealed resolution and stubbornness in the candle light. “Frankly speaking, Elder Statesman, I have often thought about a certain question these days. Bai Pingting used to be a lowly maid in the Jing-An Ducal Residence and had been under my eye for many years. He Xia and Chu Beijie are currently fighting for her, meaning that her worth is worth a hundred times more than before. If I knew this would happen, then perhaps I should have added Bai Pingting to my harem?” The conversation quite shockingly and suddenly shifted to the harem.

Le Di’s expression changed, his heart spinning like a windmill in a breeze. His own daughter was currently the Queen of Gui Le. It was because of his darling daughter, the mother of the nation, did the Le family shoot up like the sun at noon. He had naturally succeeded the military power after the defeat of the House of Jing-An.

Le Di pondered for a long time before calmly smiling. “King must be joking. Bai Pingting is very humble in origin and has the identity of a maid. I have often heard that she doesn’t look particularly pretty either. He Xia is only going so far because of their shared history, while Chu Beijie is simply shortsighted or blinded by her.”

“Joking?” The King of Dong Lin began to faintly smile. He turned to sit down, a good half of his body leaning on a handrail of the throne. His words were warm, “Senior Statesman, you are wrong.”

“Oh?”

“Bai Pingting’s beauty is not in her looks but her mind and personality. If we are to discuss this, then all of the mothers of the four countries cannot be compared to Bai Pingting. Otherwise, how could such a hero like Chu Beijie quickly withdraw his soldiers with just one letter from Bai Pingting?” Gui Le sighed for a long time before continuing, “You and I both know that that is unlike Chu Beijie.” His smile was endlessly bitter.

Le Di didn’t know what to continue with. They heard a messenger outside report, “The Queen has arrived.”

Hearing the familiar, somewhat rustling footsteps, the door of the hall was quietly pushed open, revealing the smiling face of the Queen of Gui Le.

“Oh, Madam is here.” Le Di secretly celebrated that the troublesome topic of Bai Pingting was paused there. He hurriedly stood up from his seat.

“King.” The Queen bowed at the King of Gui Le before turning to look at Le Di. “Father is here too? Please do have a seat,” she said, her voice soft. She sat down while opening the conversation breezily. “The weather these days is too unpredictable. I’m afraid Father’s leg will reanase again. I was just planning to send someone to give this medicine to

Father. Although national affairs are important, you must protect your health too.” After she spoke that much, she turned to smile at the King of Dong Lin. “Will the King stay up all night again? Did something else happen again?”

The King of Gui Le warmly smiled back at her, shaking his head. “Yun Chang and Dong Lin are no longer having a decisive battle, what else could there be? I am just talking to the Elder Statesman about Bai Pingting.”

The Queen listened to the name “Bai Pingting” and felt her heart suddenly plummet. Her face expression however did not change. “I heard that she followed He Xia to Yun Chang. I wonder how she is now.”

“Does Queen know that Chu Beijie withdrew all his troops with just a single letter from her?”

“Such thing happened?” The Queen took a deep breath and slowly whispered.

The hall was suddenly silent.

The King of Gui Le and Le Di continued to discuss national affairs. Le Di only managed to get out of the Royal Residence when the sky began to brighten. The moment he left, he got on his horse and murmured a command. “Go to the Main General Residence, hurry!”

The driver rumbled on in the dawn to the General’s Residence. General Le Zhen and his concubine had been binge drinking the past night and had yet to sleep when he heard his father’s arrival. He hurriedly climbed out of bed.

“Why are you here, Father? What’s wrong? Just send someone to pass the message on.” Le Zhen answered the gates before seeing his father’s dark expression.

Le Di didn’t say anything. He headed straight towards the office. Once he was in the office, he looked left and right before personally closing the door. He sighed in relief and lowered his voice, “The King of Dong Lin is suspicious.”

Le Zhen said “Ah” once before hurriedly asking, “What did the King say?”

“The King kept on mentioning Bai Pingting, about how he should have added her to his harem.” Le Di stared at his son and harrumphed. “That is a warning to us that the Queen’s prized throne is not very stable.”

Le Zhen replied in disdain. “A maid can be compared to our Queen? Our Le Family has produced several generations of ranking officials and our Queen was designated as the heir’s wife by the previous king.”

“Several generations of ranking officials? The House of Jing-An is an example! Not to mention, the Bai Pingting of today is not very simple. She is related not only to the Prince Consort of Yun Chang but also the Duke of Zhen-Bei of Dong Lin. She even has reliable contacts with several of Bei Mo’s generals.”

“Father...”

“Have you dealt with the one who sent the message to He Xia?”

Le Zhen replied, “Father, rest assured. I have already arranged for him to leave the capital as far as possible. The King will never notice him.”

“No!” The light in Le Di’s eyes dimmed. “You must get rid of the other end of the chopped root, so it will never grow back to form trouble.”

A painful expression surfaced on Le Di’s eyes. “Fei Zhaoxing is one of my rare generals. He has always been with me, very loyal...”

“Don’t say any more. Just do as I say.” Le Di replied coldly. “The King sent an ambush to He Xia, but we secretly reported the letter to him. If this news is to reach the King, it will become a treason, resulting in the complete destruction of our family. Our Le Family’s fame has only been shortlived. If the King is indeed suspicious and manages to find our tail, then what happened to the House of Jing-An will happen to us.” His voice lowered slightly, a coldness sweeping across his eyes. He gritted his teeth and muttered, “Fei Zhaoxing must die! As long as he dies, there will be no witness. Even if the King is suspicious, he cannot do anything against the Queen or to the Main General.”

Le Zhen’s expression revealed some hesitation. He thought about it for a while before finally making his heart ruthless. “I understand.”

Half of the berries that had been harvested were eaten.

The cold wind had blown all night. Pingting luckily hid herself in a rocky cave to escape the danger of being frozen. She reached a hand out from the cave. The sky was gray-white. She hoped today would be a fine day, so that the hurrying Zuiju would not come across a snowstorm until she safely reached Yangfeng’s side.

Three days weren’t long enough to say so but weren’t short enough to say so either.

Even though Pingting had made several promises to Zuiju, her heart was not empty in the slightest. The child sat quietly in her womb. She did not feel the extreme abdominal pain from the last few days. She felt particularly concerned about it even more.

My child, you’ll be fine.

She gently pressed down on her belly, hoping to feel the movement of the child inside. He was slowly growing older. On their journey, Pingting was sure she had felt him kicking his little feet inside his mother’s belly.

Zuiju said the child was still young and could not kick yet, but Pingting knew he was moving. The little life’s actions were full of vitality. Every little movement made her move to tears.

“My child, please protect Aunt Zuiju and protect Mother through this obstacle.” Pingting gently stroked her belly, gently whispering a few words.

She knew these dreamy like whispers were not useful, yet in her dream, this child had the same indomitable spirit like his father, both with the power to protect anyone.

Protect?

The corners of Pingting’s mouth lifted into a bitter smile. There were still a few remaining berries Zuiju plucked by her hand. The smooth skin that rabbed the plump fruit inside seemed a little wrinkled. Their colours were not as good as the day before. She was temporarily dazed, her thoughts drifting to the Cloud Valley Route.

That person had gone through the dense forest, landing on top of the berries that grew in the valley.

She and Chu Beijie exchanged suspicious looks at each other.

Chu Beijie’s outline had been very clear in the moonlight. It was determined, full of strength and heroism.

She had bluntly said, “I was the one who ordered to stop you from reaching our command tent. Sorry for forgetting to tell you.”

Chu Beijie's tiger-like eyes had flashed with a coldness. He stared at her for a long time. He raised his head to laugh loudly and mournfully at the sky. "Geez geez, Chu Beijie, you're such an idiot!"

His laughter had pierced through to her bones.

Pingting suddenly recovered, falling back to earth. The berries in her hand had been crushed to pulp, completely dying her fist in its red juice.

Ah, the berries.

That time, she had plucked a few berries too. That person was angry. Even though he was a dignified general, when he was angry, he was more like a child. He didn't care about his own injuries, pretending to be brave. He refused to let her bandage his wounds as well as to eat her berries.

Those berries were very bitter and very hard, like these ones now.

Yet, why have they still ended up together?

That man smiled at her, kissed her on the lips.

His warm breath drilled into her heart and lungs as if declaring to the world several times that Bai Pingting belonged to Chu Beijie.

He said, "I'll wait for you in Dong Lin."

He smiled, truly believing the future would be both simple and happy.

And then?

And then what?

It seemed that God did not allow them to be together, by creating all sorts of controversies. Pingting's rolling tears began to drip onto her clothes. Only then did she realise her cheeks were full of tears.

No, don't think about him any more. It will not end well. No matter how true or hard work put in until bleeding, nothing good would come out of it.

Don't think any more, don't re-injure my heart again.

Pingting tried hard to expel the warmth out of her heart. One night of rest had finally given her back some energy. She leaned against the wall, using it as support to help her stand. She planned to gather some more fresh berries. After taking two steps, she felt a sharp jolt of pain in her lower abdomen that then rippled through her body like a red hot knife stabbing into it.

"Ah!"

Pingting screamed, clutching onto her belly as she fell towards the ground.

Cold sweat began to surge out.

Child, my dear child, what's wrong?

Do you hate how bitter the berries are?

Do you hate how cold it is?

Your father is not here, so Mother will protect you.

“Ah! Ah!” Bursts of immense pain in Pingting’s lower abdomen sent her rolling to the ground. Bean-sized sweat drops began to ooze out of her forehead as her ten fingers helplessly grabbed at nothing or clawed the yellow mud leaving long scratches.

“Beijie, Beijie...” She widened her eyes, looking at the gray skies pressing closer and closer above her head. “Chu Beijie, where are you?”

Why are you not by my side?

If you appear before me right now, I swear to the skies that I will always always stay by your side and play qin and sing for you. As long as you hold my hands and say, “Pingting, I’ve found you”, then I will forget everything. I will forget the war-torn skies and forget the heartless moon on the sixth.

I will pick up each of the shattered pieces of my heart on the ground, as long as you appear right now.

I really want to see you. I want to see you.

Didn’t you say you love me?

Didn’t you say you would hurry back? I racked my brains so that I could wait for the moon of the sixth to rise, yet I never saw your figure returning home.

I want to see you, just one gaze or even your shadow.

You know, there is no word that can express my despair.

You said the we swore to the moon, to never turn against each other. Can we never turn on backs against each other?

Can we really never turn against each other?

“I hate you..”

The gray sky in Pingting’s eyes gradually became black as she felt the pain almost tear through her body. She dimly heard her voice cry out, hoarse and exhausted, “I hate you! I hate you!”

“I hate you! I hate you....”

She had used all of her energy in her cries, until she plunged into the deep darkness. She only vaguely realised that to hate someone, rather than forget them, was much easier.

Chapter 48

Apart from Gui Le, there was still another army eyeing the armies of Yun Chang and Dong Lin.

After Ze Yin had resigned, retiring to a secluded residence, Ruohan succeeded the position of Bei Mo's Main General. He had accompanied Ze Yin for many years through civil wars and military exploits as well as the necessary characteristics, so his promotion was expected by all.

Ruohan led the Bei Mo army, waiting not far away from Yun Chang's borders. Bei Mo was almost destroyed by Chu Beijie in the last battle, so all of Bei Mo's generals viewed him as a grim reaper. If they could slip between the gaps between Yun Chang and Dong Lin, adding their own two cents in killing Chu Beijie, then naturally it would give great benefits to Bei Mo.

However...

"The battle has ended."

"Not ended, more like they didn't start at all."

"What's going on?"

Inside the advisory tent, Ruohan settled the army reports in his hands down onto the table. He then held his hands behind his back as he raised his head to look at the round ceiling of the tent.

"Main General?"

"Bai Pingting..." Ruohan seemed to be trying to remember it all, returning to Kanbu City back then. "Miss Bai, what on earth did you write in your letter to stop a battle? Ruohan has no idea whether to feel disappointment or admiration towards you." A wry smile appeared on his face.

Even now, he could still deeply remember that qin sound. The Kanbu city walls had been crumbling, a devastating condition, when Chu Beijie appeared with several thousands of elite soldiers outside the city. Then, at that very moment, he heard the most melodious music.

Bai Pingting positioned herself on a high palanquin. Her long sleeves directed the wind, flying lightly.

She saved Kanbu, saved Bei Mo. Or it could also be said that Ruohan's promotion as Main General was all thanks to the plans she had set out in those days.

Yet, where was the woman who caused all of Bei Mo's generals to willingly lower their heads today?

"Main General, the army of Dong Lin has already withdrawn. What shall we do?"

"The deciding war has not started, therefore the core of the Dong Lin army is not hurt. We mustn't be stupid to take the initiative in attacking. Since this opportunity is no more, get all divisions to withdraw too." Ruohan resolutely ordered, "Pass on this Order, rest tonight and return early morning tomorrow."

The various generals returned their positions. Sen Rong, the Commander of the Right Wing, was the last to leave and he stopped at the door of the tent. He thought for a while before walking back to ask, "General, is there any news about Miss Bai?"

"I heard that she has left Yun Chang. Her whereabouts are unknown." Ruohan sighed.

Sen Rong frowned. "She is hated by the King of Dong Lin for murdering his sons. Yun Chang's He Xia wants to imprison her, and it seems that she can't return to Gui Le either. General, do you think she'll..."

“I think so too.” Ruohan nodded. “When we leave tomorrow, you can choose thirty of your most competent subordinates to stay and to patrol near the borders. If they can meet her, then we’ve at least helped a little.”

Sen Rong quickly nodded at this. “Yes, I was thinking that too. Sigh, it leaves quite a bitter taste in my mouth, but that’s all we can do.” He looked at Ruohan before opening his mouth again. The words were however got in his throat, and he couldn’t pull them back out again. In the end, he refrained.

Ruohan could see he had stopped his words. There were only the two of them in the tent. They were brothers who had fought for many years together on the battlefield. There was no way one didn’t understand what the other was thinking. He lowered his voice, “You don’t need to say any more, I totally understand. Ever since General Ze Yin left, the King’s thoughts has become more and more unpredictable. No one would’ve thought that the King would ally with He Xia to form an army of three hundred thousand to pressure Dong Lin’s borders, forcing the King of Dong Lin to hand over Miss Bai. It seemed that the bad deed did not get punished. Even if people despised the idea, the King’s Order is not to be breached. Sen Rong, I have led troops for many years, but I had never felt so guilty when leading them until that moment.”

The two had thought the same. Sen Rong heavily stomped once, replying in a gruff voice, “Don’t say any more. This really ruins the mood. If General Ze Yin was still around, he would’ve definitely convinced the King to not ally with that bastard He Xia. If only...sigh...” He sighed loudly as he lifted the door flap and strode away.

Ruohan was left in the room, thinking about many things.

Although the decisive battle between Yun Chang and Dong Lin did not start, the situation of the four countries had become much more subtle. Everyone was gathering their strength in the darkness, waiting for the storm that would suddenly break the current silence. It seemed the real battle between the four countries would break out within three years. Was Bei Mo’s military power enough to withstand the catastrophe at that time?

He slowly paced up and down in the tent, deciding what clearly needed to be changed in the army. He turned to sit down, spreaded out some paper and began to write a report to the King of Bei Mo.

After an army report of several hundreds of words, Ruohan blew the ink on it that had yet to dry. Thinking that he had to summon the messenger to take the letter on a fast horse back to the capital, he raised his head and suddenly began to shake.

There was a blurry figure in front of him. He had no idea how long it had been standing before him, quietly.

“I’ll make a bet with General. Before General can call for help, I will have already sliced General’s throat.”

The man wore black. From the black mask on his face, only a pair of piercing eyes were revealed. His right hand was pressing down on his sword. The sword had yet to come out of its scabbard, yet it already exuded a murderous intent.

Ruohan had experienced hundreds of battles and a great many were near-death experiences. However, as his calm and collected expression touched this man, it completely froze.

So imposing, so brave, who was this man?

“So what if you kill me, there is no chance of you leaving alive anyway.” Ruohan stared into those eyes, lowering his voice.

The intruder laughed. “Then let me make another bet with General. After killing you, not only can I get out as freely as I did coming in, I can even leisurely get rid of a few generals of Bei Mo. Yun Chang and Dong Lin’s battle didn’t happen in the end, so all the soldiers are relaxed thinking they will not be involved in the war. You ordered all troops

to return tomorrow morning. It is currently late at night, so all the soldiers are taking this opportunity to get some rest of course. All are likely to be sleeping soundly.”

Although this wasn't in a battle and the guards would indeed be more relaxed, this man had silently sneaked into the heart of the army camp without raising any alarms. His skill was beyond measure.

Ruohan stared at him.

The skin on his hand revealed a tan from the sun, while the tanned skin appeared solid like steel that had been smelted. A master had then elaborately carved into it, so that it could not be broken with just a hit.

Ruohan stared at him for a long time before softly gasping, “Chu Beijie?”

“As expected of Ze Yin, at least you can guess quite a bit.” Chu Beijie chuckled, taking off the cloth mask. His handsome, angular face popped out.

This was the first time Ruohan had been so close or clearly see the greatest enemy of Bei Mo.

No wonder he was so imposing and courageous. No wonder he had entered the Bei Mo army camp like a game. This man was Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei after all, the world famous Chu Beijie.

And the man that Bai Pingting deeply loved.

“The reason why the Duke of Zhen-Bei snuck into this army camp is to kill me?”

“I don't want to take your life right now.” Chu Beijie answered, “I have come here because I want you to pass on a message to the King of Bei Mo.”

“What message?”

“He dared to send troops to study my Dong Lin's army, thinking that he could add his own two cents. He must bear the consequences.” Chu Beijie lowered his head as he studied the precious sword in his hands. “My hands are very itchy since the battle against Yun Chang never began. From now on, I will kill all of Bei Mo's generals, one by one starting from the highest ranking general, until the King of Bei Mo no longer has any generals available. That way he can watch how his troops slowly disintegrate over time. Isn't that very interesting?”

Ruohan was surprised for a moment before he sneered back, “In other words, the Duke of Zhen-Bei is still here to be an assassin.” He thought his death was imminent, but was not afraid of it. He suddenly stood up, unsheathing his sword. He shouted, “My Bei Mo's army camp will not allow you to leave as freely as you came. Even if I am to give up my life today, I must kill you for the King. Someone come!” He shouted and waited for a bit, but no one rushed in.

Ruohan was surprised again.

Chu Beijie disdainfully replied, “If you want to shout, you should do better than that. All of your personal guards have had their heads looped off, and the nearest tent is five feet away. It's all thanks to the irrational rules in your Bei Mo army, saying that the advisory tent had to have some distance away from the rest of the army tents.

Ruohan's heart slightly froze at this. All of the guards outside the tent were close confidants, all talented in their own way yet had been quietly eliminated by Chu Beijie. Taking advantage of the rising anger, he screamed, “Someone come! There's an assassin!” He raised his own sword and dashed forwards to attack.

Chu Beijie coldly observed the enemy thrusting his sword towards him. His pupils shrank slightly as his sword was finally pulled out of its scabbard. The cold flash began to wave, followed by the clashing sound of the two swords.

colliding into the other. Ruohan felt a wave of great power as he sliced into the air. His shoulders stiffened, and he abruptly came back to his senses to see the figure of Chu Beijie flashing in the candlelight had disappeared. Ruohan was secretly alarmed by this and quickly swung left and right. He took two steps back before suddenly feeling an immense pain. He cried out miserably once, a cut already on his waist.

Ruohan endured the immense pain and brought his sword up to stab again but his hand happened to be brought towards Chu Beijie. Chu Beijie tapped on it before slamming at Ruohan's sore wound, causing his sword to clatter to the ground. It knocked over the candle stand which rolled twice on the ground. All of the candles went out, plunging the advisory tent into silent darkness.

Ruohan could only see black, yet he felt a chill on his neck. He knew that Chu Beijie had already placed his precious sword on his neck.

This man, in three moves, killed Ze Yin's best subordinate, Mengchu, in Kanbu back then. As expected of his fame, he was indeed a skilled man.

Ruohan knew he had come to a dead end, but he refused to beg for mercy. He heard faint, frantic footsteps outside and clenched his teeth. "You can kill me if you want, but you will definitely not be able to escape."

Chu Beijie remained very confident and sneered, "Of course if I want to kill. I start from the Main General, but as I said before, I don't want to take your life right now. When you see your King, make sure to remember to tell him not to mess with my Dong Lin."

Ruohan had yet to open his mouth before he felt a throb in his head and fainted.

The Songsen Mountains were covered by ice and snow. When the sun shone on the snow, a red light was reflected. A petite figure stepped through the snow—some deep, some shallow—as she hurried on her way.

The snow was very deep, sometimes to her knee. Every step taken resulted in a lot of energy spent.

Zuiju's breathing was heavy. The light that reflected in the snow dazzled her eyes. Her eyes began to darken. She struggled to see the road ahead. Sometimes, she couldn't help but lean against a tree to catch her breath, but when she did stop, her heart began to be harshly clawed by guilt.

Pingting was exhausted and waiting for her at the rocky area.

Pingting and the child in her belly were waiting for her.

Pingting was struggling, and Zuiju knew this best. She was a doctor, so there was no way she didn't know about Pingting's situation. However, there was no chance of survival if the two journeyed together. Pingting was right. Going ahead alone to see Yangfeng and getting help soon after was their only chance of survival.

Dear God, why must it be like this?

In one shot, plum blossoms at the secluded residence that yet to open, its fragrance yet to float in the wind and in the next, became a dead end.

Why did the most intelligent woman who loved the most heroic man had to have such a fate?

The luminous jade hairpin Yangfeng gave to Pingting was securely pinned in Zuiju's hair. That hairpin seemingly weighed a ton, pressing down on Zuiju like how Pingting and her child's lives did.

She took out the map and studied it carefully.

“Lost again?” Zuiju worriedly frowned. The white Songsen Mountains had often caused disorientation to the people on it. She knew she was very close to Yangfeng’s place, as she had desperately hurried onwards without rest.

Her destination was one of the mountains near Bei Mo on the Songsen Mountains.

It was nearby, it had to be nearby.

“Kyaa!” Her foot slipped and Zuiju fell on the snow once more.

It doesn’t matter, I’ve already fallen several hundred, several thousand times already. Teacher, Teacher, I bet you didn’t think that little Zuiju would be so brave one day.

The air is very cold, but my heart has a fire that is almost burning me whole.

She gritted her teeth and climbed out of the snow. She suddenly jumped back in alarm as she saw a man’s figure pop into her eyes. She had been journeying through the Songsen Mountains for the longest time but never see anyone except for Pingting.

A man.

The man was dressed in mountaineering clothing. His hands were lightly clutching to a crossbow and seemingly blocked Zuiju from proceeding.

Zuiju looked at his cold expression and began to feel wary.

She slowly straightened.

Fanlu silently assessed her before finally raising the corners of his lips to spit out three syllables. “Bai Pingting?”

“Who are you?”

“So you’re Bai Pingting.” His gaze rested on Zuiju’s hair as he praised, “Such a exquisite hairpin.”

Zuiju began to tremble and felt a foreboding feeling hitting at her heart.

She stared at Fanlu, slowly stepping backwards.

Fanlu’s crossbow rose slowly. The sharp arrow tip gleamed in the forest as it pointed towards her chest.

Zuiju felt she had died at that very moment. Her body went cold and every hair trembled. The hairpin above was much too heavy and drilled her into the ground.

No, I mustn’t die.

She thought of Pingting.

The Pingting who had leisurely read a book on a couch, the Pingting who had played qin in the snow and the Pingting who had plucked plum blossoms. She remembered the Pingting that had slumped to the ground as the moon passed half the sky, crying in utter pain and desolation.

I mustn't die here. Zuiju fiercely glared at Fanlu. She had no energy left to fight back, not to mention Fanlu held a lightweight crossbow, but she fiercely glared at him anyway.

Fanlu was almost confused by her eyes. He never knew that a woman could face death without fear.

As he hesitated, Zuiju madly turned around to run.

No, I mustn't die!

She borrowed strength from the skies, causing her to crazily escape to the forests.

Whoosh.

The slight sound of wind breaking came into her ear as an arrow whisked slightly passed her face, lodging itself into a tree beside her. Zuiju was shocked and her footsteps became even more chaotic.

Whoosh, whoosh...

The slight sound of wind breaking came near her ear again. One after the other, the arrows flew into the trees and bushes. Zuiju dodged them one by one in panic.

Dear God, are you trying to help me?

Please help me to the end. Please let me see Yangfeng and let her know Miss Bai is waiting for her help.

And her child, the blood and flesh of the Duke, one of the Dong Lin Royal House.

She was desperate to escape. All she could see was white. Her foot had stepped into the nothingness.

“Ah!” Zuiju cried out in panic, involuntarily falling through the air.

She fell heavily into a pile of deep snow. Her right leg happened to hit a protruding rock.

Jolt!

A terrible pain began to come up her legs. It was so painful, it almost shut off the rest of her body.

“Ah...” Zuiju groaned, barely propping her upper body to sit up. She hoped to have a proper look at her leg.

It was definitely broken. Her entire body shook from the pain from the bone.

What to do? She still had to hurry and pass on the message. She definitely could not stop here. Herbs, as long as some herbs were boiled, then enduring it was fine.

Yet where were the herbs?

She turned around, searching her surroundings as well as she could. It was completely white with dead trees and a few rocks that came out of the snow, but what else?

She looked at the east and hesitated, as if unable to believe what she saw. She hurriedly raised her hands to rub her eyes.

“Ah it's there!” Zuiju felt a mixture of surprise and pain. Her eyes began to feel moist.

I see it, I see it! The mountain where Yangfeng's secluded residence lies is finally before my eyes. I have reached the foot of the mountain and reached to this place.

Zuiju can finally burst into tears of joy, for it has been found. Miss Bai, we're saved.

"Miss Bai, wait for me. I can already see it."

The pain jolted as Zuiju tried to climb up. She was almost half up when she suddenly felt no support and helplessly fell back onto the earth.

"It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter." She quietly told herself. "I can climb over there. I can climb up the mountain."

A light flashed in her eyes, like a pearl flashing in the deep sea. After the longest and most refined gestation period, it was finally ready to shine.

Zuiju dragged her body forwards through the snow. Why was the way there was still so far? She gritted her teeth to no end as she struggled forwards. She felt she was near the end of the world, yet the vast whiteness remained before her.

Her bright red blood whirled on the snow, leaving a gorgeous panting.

She heard footsteps approach from afar. She raised her head. The claws of despair raked into her until it coldly strangled her heart.

Fanlu was standing somewhere above, observing her coldly.

No, No...

Zuiju angrily glared back at him.

I am already here, you can take away our final thread to survival so easily.

Just one step away, only one step.

Fanlu's hands did not move. His right hand held the crossbow, while his left held an arrow. He had already retrieved every single arrow he had shot earlier. Twenty seven altogether, none missing.

Zuiju stared at him and stared at his arrows.

No, I mustn't die.

Pingting is still waiting for me in the snow and wind. There is a limit of three days, for both her and her child.

Chu Beijie had broken the promise of the sixth, ruining her happiness. I can't make another mistake and ruin her life.

The snowy ground and the mountains were cold and heartless. It brought a strong feeling of death, enough to saturate one's heart, but it did very little to hide its ability to give heartbreaking despair.

Zuiju raised her head, shouting in grief. "Yangfeng! Yangfeng! Are you there? Help me!"

"Yangfeng! Man General's wife, Yangfeng, can you hear me?"

“Anyone is fine, Chu Beijie, Duke of Zhen-Bei, He Xia, please save Bai Pingting! Have all of you forgotten Bai Pingting?”

“Chu Beijie, you coward, have you forgotten Bai Pingting?”

She is your wife, with your flesh and blood. She is not supposed to go to the end of the world, nor be buried in the Songsen Mountains.

“How could you not appear? How could you...” Zuiju helpless cried on, “Do you still remember Bai Pingting? Do you still remember the words you said? How could you forget...”

The echos bounced through the forest, yet a miracle did not occur.

It was unfair, very unfair.

She raised her head, her face stained with tears when she saw a smile in Fanlu’s lips.

“Can you smell the scent of snow?” Pingting had asked her this, on their very first meeting.

She had accompanied her Teacher to attend all sorts of rich families and the Royal House, seen many different people and incidents, yet she had never seen such deep love before.

Bai Pingting and the Duke of Zhen-Bei.

It was superior love, yet it was so mournful, so desolate, so heartbreaking.

Dear heavens, you are far too heartless.

Why do you not pity such deep love?

The small little Zuiju is willing to pay her life, yet still cannot change this into a happy ending.

“Yangfeng! Yangfeng! Hurry and come out! I beg you to come out!”

The mountain continued to echo back the cries of Zuiju. Fanlu quietly sat above, watching her unsatisfied struggle.

He did not raise his crossbow, because there was no need.

Zuiju shouted until her voice was hoarse, as if a fire had engulfed her throat. Once she had ran out of energy to cry, she quietened. The scent of snow began to float into her nose and with it, the metallic smell of blood.

Blood that gurgled out of her leg.

Zuiju seemed to notice something. She propped up her upper body with great effort, nervously looking in all directions.

In the falling night, she saw flickering green lights that had quietly crept from the forests.

Wolves!

She finally understood what the coldness in Fanlu’s smile meant.

Chapter 49

“Main General?! Main General! Wake up!”

Ruohan felt a splitting headache as he opened his eyes. The advisory tent was brightly lit with candles. He saw several faces of concerned generals above his head.

Where was Chu Bejie?

Ruohan clutched to his head as he forcefully sat up. “Where is he? Has he been caught?”

Everyone looked at each other. Sen Rong was pushed by everyone towards the front. His voice was a little muffled, “We heard General’s call and rushed into the advisory tent. It was pitch-black everywhere and because we had no idea whether General was alive or not, it was chaotic as we panicked. When the candles were lit, we searched around but could not find the assassin’s traces.”

Ruohan sighed once and slapped his leg. “Damn it, such a pity!” But then he remembered that Chu Bejie would not be caught so easily. He should have already thought of how to leave before entering the camp.

Huacan was a newly promoted general. He lowered his voice to report, “Fifteen of Main General’s guards were killed. It appears to be a surprise attack, and they were killed by a single cut at the throat. This assassin’s skill is truly terrifying.”

The bodies of the guards had been personally checked by each general. Each of them thought the skill of the enemy was incredible, causing an expression of fear on everyone.

Sen Rong shook his head. “The four countries has never heard of such a terrifying assassin. Perhaps it’s time to tidy our Dong Lin’s army camp. What would’ve happened if something happened to Main General and the army lost its advisor?”

“Yeah. Who on earth was the assassin?”

Ruohan was silent for a long time, before he replied, “Chu Bejie.”

Although the tent was huge, it was suddenly silent. All the generals exchanged looks amongst each other, not knowing what to say.

Finally reacting, Sen Rong took a deep breath before opening his mouth wide to say, “He was actually the Duke of Zhen-Bei?”

The name Chu Bejie, to them, was like a nightmare.

In Kanbu, Chu Bejie had almost destroyed their country. This person had controlled the enemy’s strategies and his resourcefulness was shocking. His swordsmanship was even more chilling

This time, by sneaking into an armed enemy camp, he once again showed his courage and superior abilities.

Who could not get a headache from having such an enemy?

“What on earth did he come here to do?”

“I’m not sure.” Ruohan’s expression was extremely twisted. “He wanted me to pass on a message to the King.” He then recounted what had happened. Although it was very humiliating to be knocked out so easily, military affairs could not be treated lightly, so Ruohan still revealed everything honestly.

Everyone understood that the intruder was Chu Beijie. They did not doubt the words from Ruohan’s mouth in the slightest. When they heard that Chu Beijie had declared to kill all of Bei Mo’s generals, one by one, all of them were so angry that their eyes became red. They loudly cursed him.

Ruohan then said, “Chu Beijie’s words are perhaps not without ground. If our army camp’s security remains so lax, then we won’t be able to withstand highly skilled people like him in the future.”

When he said this, everyone went silent.

The Bei Mo army camp was far less strictly organised or trained compared to the Dong Lin army. Everyone knew that clearly.

An army that Chu Beijie had trained could only perhaps be evenly matched against He Xia.

Ruohan looked outside the tent. The sky had yet to brighten. There was only a whisp of orange light faintly shining through the gray clouds.

“Our departure will not change. We set off tomorrow, so you may all leave. Let me think in peace for a while.” As the people left, Ruohan called to Sen Rong, “Stay here.”

Sen Rong nodded and sat down, thinking. He frowned, “Main General, there is one thing that I don’t get at all, no matter how much I think. Chu Beijie threatened to kill my Bei Mo’s generals and successfully infiltrated, but why did he only want Main General to pass on a message rather than begin his killing spree?”

Ruohan replied, “I also think this matter is strange. Judging from his face, he holds great faith in his skills in battle and is extremely arrogant. He immediately threatened that he wanted to kill all of Bei Mo’s generals, one by one starting from the highest ranking general, until Bei Mo no longer has any generals available.”

“But, Main General is already the highest ranking general in Bei Mo. If Chu Beijie really wanted to do that, he wouldn’t let go of Main General.”

Ruohan’s expression suddenly changed and he abruptly stood up from his chair. “Damn it, I know!”

Sen Rong was surprised. “What does Main General know?”

Ruohan’s expression was solemn and his voice sunk. He slowly replied, “Main General, Main General Ze Yin.”

This time it was Sen Rong’s turn to pale. “That’s right, he definitely wants to kill Main General Ze Yin first!”

Ze Yin was the pillar of the Bei Mo army. Even though he had retired to live in a secluded residence, his prestige in the army had not changed, the Bei Mo equivalent of Chu Beijie in the Dong Lin army.

If the news of Ze Yin’s assassination by Chu Beijie was to spread through the world, then the morale of the Bei Mo army would collapse and become extremely vulnerable.

Sen Rong was also a seasoned general who accompanied Ze Yin for many years. He couldn’t help feel worried about Ze Yin. He rubbed his hands anxiously, asking, “What to do? We can’t just sit back and watch a matter concerning Main General’s life and death unfold.”

“Main General is my Bei Mo’s famous swordsmanship practitioner and has loyal guards by his side. I’m just afraid that Chu Beijie may somehow slip through the gaps and happen to succeed.”

“We must immediately contact Main General, so that he is warned of Chu Beijie.” Sen Rong suddenly remembered something and he was distressed. “No one knows where the Main General went to live in seclusion after resigning. We must immediately send people out to find Main General, to report this news. Chu Beijie holds all of Dong Lin’s military power and has many spies. We mustn’t let him find Main General before we do.”

Ruohan was confident and he smiled, “No need to worry, I know. I’ll write a letter now. Main General is a hero himself, so as long as he makes enough preparations, he will absolutely not let Chu Beijie succeed.”

When early dawn fell, a fast horse rushed out from the Bei Mo army camp, heading towards the Songsen Mountains.

Chu Beijie, who had been waiting for a long time on the grass of another hill saw the small back of the messenger moving rapidly in the distance. He gently got up by using the beloved horse by his side. “Time to hit the road. We’ll go find your female owner.”

He turned to mount up, calmly tugging the reins in his hands.

The horse neighed, released its four legs to pound the yellow dust below, chasing after the messenger soldier.

Judging by the direction the soldier was heading to, as expected, Ze Yin and Yangfeng’s secluded residence was somewhere in the vast Songsen Mountains.

Pingting, you have often mentioned your good friend, Yangfeng, to me.

If her secluded residence is near Yun Chang, then you will definitely go to find her, right?

Have you already seen Yangfeng? Or are you still on the way?

Chu Beijie is incompetent. I breached several Yun Chang checkpoints, yet couldn’t get your whereabouts at all. Although the sword in my hand is sharp, I cannot force out your whereabouts from the sky, in all these seas of snow.

Pingting, please stop your footsteps and don’t drift around any more. Don’t forget your good friend, Yangfeng. Go and see her.

I will wait for you there, catch you, hug you, kiss you and apologise to you. I beg you to forgive me – for the feelings that had spread like clear water, lingered like fragrance in the air. I look forward to our love that can be as firm as a mountain.

I already understand what is the greatest power, the end of the world and what is—to never turn against each other.

Yun Chang capital was full of singing and joy throughout the night. Multicoloured fireworks ascended to the sky with a bang, illuminating the delight on all of the peasant’s faces in the capital.

The Princess and the Prince Consort returned.

The luxurious carriage had all of its curtains raised. Yaotian revealed a happy smile and was nestled in He Xia’s arms. This touching and comforting scene was deeply imprinted in the hearts of the citizens.

Following behind the two were the thousands of Yun Chang soldiers, safely returned to their home. They had departed with certain death on the battlefield, but the skies had mercy on them. There was no test of war in the end.

What waited for them were cheers and a sky full of dazzling fireworks.

And finally, good alcohol.

“This cup is dedicated to Senior Official.”

The colourful dance maids crossed the main hall as the hundred, somewhat drunk, officials laughed carefreely. He Xia’s laughter was rich as he gulped down cup after cup of the endless cups the officials dedicated to him. He then took the jar of alcohol himself and stepped towards Gui Changqing who had been sitting at one side, smiling all along.

Gui Changqing was a bit stunned by this, hurriedly lifting his own cup. “I dare not, this cup is still dedicated to Prince Consort. Prince Consort led the troops on such a faraway expedition. It must’ve been tough.”

He Xia drank quite a lot, his handsome cheeks slightly flushed. His dark eyes had no trace of tipsiness, however, as he said, “Senior Official is too modest. Leading troops to war is simply manual labour. Senior Official is the one who truly worked the hardest, handling affairs from the capital.”

Gui Changqing had never been one to drink, but the moment the threat of war had been eliminated, it was such great news that even people who didn’t like to drink had to celebrate with a couple of drinks. He collected his pride together and raised his cup, “Fine, a cup to the Prince Consort. I also wish my Princess Yaotian will be blessed with longevity, hm, as well as heirs soon.”

He Xia laughed at this, “Such an honest wish, thank you Senior Official!” He raised his head to drain the cup in a single gulp.

“Prince Consort.”

“Luyi?” He Xia turned around and saw Yaotian’s personal maid. He looked around at the various noisily celebrating officials, bustling with activity, before taking her to one side and lowering his voice, “Did the Princess summon me?”

Luyi shook her head, biting onto her lower lip as she smiled. “No. The Princess told me to tell Prince Consort that she had been subject to a long bumpy ride and is very tired. She took a bath before going to sleep and would like Prince Consort to see her tomorrow. The Princess also said to be careful of your own body and not to drink too much alcohol. Prince Consort has also travelled for a long time and too much alcohol can easily damage your health.”

He Xia broke into a laugh. “I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to last the alcohol here. Now that the Princess has given her Order, then it’s perfect timing to send them all back home to sleep.”

He immediately then used Yaotian’s words to break up the officials that still wanted to celebrate and left the Royal Residence first, to go to the Prince Consort Residence.

The Prince Consort Residence long had its entrance wide open, with many servants waiting outside. Dongzhuo was leading them and had his neck strained. He saw a figure swaying in the distance before hearing the sound of hooves. Several people then stepped forwards.

“Welcome back, Prince Consort!”

“Welcome back, Prince Consort!”

The horse stopped and Dongzhuo immediately went forwards to take the reins. He raised his head, “Master, you’re back.”

“Yeah.” He Xia answered once before dismounting. Just when he was about to walk through the door, he saw the several maids that had stepped forwards to welcome him back. His eyebrows creased slightly, “Why are there so many people in the doorway? You can all go.”

Dongzhuo took the reins and threw it at a manservant waiting aside. He dismissed the other servants and followed his Master.

He Xia’s strides were large and did not have any hint of stopping. Dongzhuo hurried behind him. He Xia headed straight for the rear courtyard and turned two or three corners before reaching the room where Pingting had lived in. He suddenly stopped, stood outside the door, and for the longest time remained frozen.

Dongzhuo quietly watched him stare at Pingting’s door, as if like a statue of wood. From what he saw, he just felt desolation.

He had thought He Xia was heartless back then and so when Yaotian had revolted, he had turned a blind eye and let Pingting go. However, seeing He Xia today, he realised that he truly felt miserable.

Dongzhuo felt guilty as well as sad. He couldn’t help but walk towards him and softly calling, “Master.”

He Xia returned to his senses when he heard his call. He absentmindedly looked at him before slowly walking towards the door, raising his hands to push lightly on the door.

Squeak...

A slight sound was produced from the rotating door shafts. The room’s furnishings entered his eye little by little.

The flowers on the window sill had already withered, and the bed had been cleaned properly, the mantle pulled to the side. There was a pair of embroidered shoes placed underneath the bed. On the dressing table, a bronze mirror stood and beside it, the gilded box that he had specifically ordered to be made for Pingting stood quietly. The qin was still there. It sat silently on the table, yet already had a thin layer of dust.

He Xia strode into the room, his footsteps were very light, as if afraid to break something. He sat on the icy-cold chair, placing his precious sword from his waist down onto the table.

He had used that very sword to sword dance.

Here, he was in this Prince Consort Residence.

His sword gently came out of his scabbard like a dragon entering water, smoothly gliding in, shedding its dirty half which floated on the water like a quilt.

Pingting was there. She remained seated at the pavilion, silently watching.

Her eyes were like watery smoke and her fingertips played the piece “Nine Days.” The moment the qin sound began, he almost thought that everything had not changed.

He almost thought that the days had not passed, the seasons had not changed and death was non-existent.

He had been wrong.

In the depths of He Xia’s eyes, there was a cold light flashing. He was wrong, the days had passed and overturning the seasons did not exist.

Schemes and ability was not powerful enough.

He had painstakingly used all of his energy to protect this beautiful illusion of the past, yet just a single light-hearted Order from the Princess wiped it all away.

Yaotian, his wife, the master of Yun Chang.

He Xia was deeply jolted awake by facing the room that had lost Pingting and the Prince Consort Residence that had lost its warmth.

As long as Yaotian existed, he would always be the Prince Consort.

A Prince Consort that was unable to keep his own maid.

“Master, this guqin...shall I pack it away?”

“No need.” He Xia gazed at the dusty guqin and the corners of his lips quivered slightly. “Leave it, so it can wait for Pingting to come back.”

Pingting will definitely return, return to my side.

I refuse to let anyone steal my things and will never allow anyone to tarnish the House of Jing-An again.

I will not let the Royal House of Dong Lin and Gui Changqing, that damn old geezer, to bind my hands and feet.

I will not let my ambition be succumbed under Yaotian's tenderness or the throne.

No one is allowed to treat me like that.

Chu Beijie was now at the foot of the Songsen Mountains on his horse, after trailing behind the messenger. He looked up to see the majestic mountains seeming more mysteriously beautiful covered in white snow than usual.

Yangfeng was in these mountains.

Pingting should also be in these mountains.

Perhaps she was playing qin, or maybe reading, or softly singing about heroes and beautiful woman. As Chu Beijie gazed at the solemn mountains, he couldn't stop his heart from fluttering everywhere.

He was very eager to see Pingting indeed.

He longed to see her. The longing in his dreams was not enough to describe the howling longing he felt overall. It was insufficient to restrain his anxiety.

The messenger had been strictly ordered by Ruohan and was very careful to hurry on his way. He kept on looking back constantly to see if he was being tailed, but no matter how capable he was, there was no way he could detect such an expert at tailing like Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie watched him from faraway until reaching the mountain where Ze Yin's secluded residence was located. He rode his horse up the mountain and finally saw dozens of wooden cabins hidden in the forest.

Chu Beijie began to dash forwards, but had yet to reach the cabins when several burly men suddenly jumped out from the side of the road. They shouted, “Stop! Do you know what this place is and still dare to loiter around?” Their swords were in their hands, cold light flashing. All of them were fairly skilled.

These threats were a trifling matter to Chu Beijie and he didn’t care at all. Chu Beijie didn’t defend or flee, he just sat on his horse as he looked around. He lowered his voice, “Tell Ze Yin that Chu Beijie has arrived.”

“Chu Beijie?”

“Dong Lin’s Chu Beijie?”

“The Duke of Zhen-Bei?”

“That’s me.” A determined smile escaped from Chu Beijie’s lips. “I am here to pick up my Duchess—Bai Pingting.”

The man with a heart as cold as ice who had led the Dong Lin army to battle in all directions, killing everyone, was now before their eyes?

Some people’s hands shook so much that their swords almost fell to the ground.

“What are you being dazed for? Hurry and pass on the message.” Chu Beijie got off the horse and sneezed once before stepping forwards.

Everyone was shocked by this and took several steps back, looking alert. This famous general had almost ruined their Main General, Ze Yin, in the battle of Kanbu, almost leading to the destruction of the entire Bei Mo.

A coward sobbed once before turning to report. The remaining people stayed on the spot, terrified, surrounding Chu Beijie with their spears. Everyone was staring at the precious sword at his waist.

Rumours had that whenever the sword of the Duke of Zhen-Bei came out of its scabbard, rivers of blood were sure to flow.

Chu Beijie sat on his horse. He seemed to be like a general that had fallen from the skies, although he was fiercely glared at, his expression remained leisurely. A faint hint of joy was present on his face.

Pingting, I have already arrived.

What are you doing?

Are you playing with Yangfeng?

You said before that Yangfeng played very fine too. Perhaps you’ll let Chu Beijie watch the match from the sidelines? Let me sit by your side, watch your slender fingers, pick up the black and white stones before lightly placing them onto the board. Such scene would certainly be pleasing and I will never tire of it.

The man who had ran to pass on the message quickly returned. His expression was very strange. He did not dare stand too close to Chu Beijie as he submissively replied, “Duke of Zhen-Bei, our Main General would like to see you.”

Chu Beijie nodded, pleased. He followed the manservant who lead the way to the front gates. The gates were silent and without people. He did not see Yangfeng, nor did he see Ze Yin.

He was brave in nature and had never been afraid of the Dong Lin Royal Residence or palace guards or blood when young. Of course, he was not afraid of such a low cabin either.

When he got off the horse, he placed his hand on the hilt of his sword as he headed straight inside.

When he stepped into the room, he was stunned. His eyes were filled with a pure white when he entered. Apart from the white walls, in the huge guest room, there was absolutely nothing at all except a huge coffin placed in the middle.

The room Chu Beijie had stepped in was actually mourning room.

There was a man with a very solemn expression standing in the room. His eyebrows were thick and dark, and his eyes were breathtakingly piercing. “The Duke of Zhen-Bei?”

Chu Beijie calmly raised his eyes to meet his. “The Main General of Bei Mo?”

He suddenly heard a high pitched woman’s voice. “Chu Beijie! Where is Chu Beijie?”

Chu Beijie knew Pingting’s voice by heart. He guessed the female’s voice was from the Main General’s wife. He raised his voice, “I am here.”

His words had yet to fall when the curtain to the side room was lifted. A petite figure rushed into the room. Yangfeng’s face was very pale and then, as if crazy, went to stab at Chu Beijie’s chest.

Although her arrival was sudden, there was no way she could hurt Chu Beijie. The sword had yet to reach his chest when Chu Beijie reached out and grabbed onto Yangfeng’s hand.

Ze Yin hadn’t expected that Yangfeng would rush out with a sword from the side room. It was too late by the time he realised and his expression darkened. “How dare you hurt my wife?” He jumped up to pounce.

Chu Beijie had stopped Yangfeng in one go and had, after remembering she was a good friend of Pingting, not dared to do anything at all. His fingertips pressed lightly on her slender wrist before gently pushing her. Yangfeng was no longer stable and began to fall backwards.

Ze Yin happened to be in the right place and caught her. He knew that Chu Beijie was powerful and feared that Yangfeng had been injured. He hurriedly asked, “Are you hurt?”

Yangfeng shook her head. Her hair was very messy and her eyes were very red. There was not a slight trace of her usual relaxed appearance. She suddenly swivelled round to glare at Chu Beijie before suddenly breaking into tears. She grabbed on Zuiju’s sleeves, pleading, “Kill him for me! Hurry and kill him!”

From what Chu Beijie heard from Pingting, Yangfeng was always warm and polite. He had not expected that his first impression of her was a crazy woman. His heart began to feel doubtful as his gaze swept around the room, resting on the coffin. He was secretly alarmed and his heart was for once, frightened. He whispered, “Where is Pingting?”

Yangfeng seemed to not be able to hear his words. She just thumped Ze Yin’s chest as she cried, “Husband, kill him for me! He was the one who killed Pingting! He killed Pingting!”

Chu Beijie felt as if lightning splintered through his head. He took two abrupt steps forward. He shouted, “What did you say? What did you just say?”

This shout was like the roar of the tiger, and it seemed to make Yangfeng come back to her senses. She stopped hitting Ze Yin who was trying to comfort her and absentmindedly turned to stare at Chu Beijie. It seemed that blood wanted to flood out from her red eyes as she spat out, “You killed Pingting. You hated her and sent her off to He Xia, so that she died a lonely death in the snow.” Every word was squeezed through her clenched teeth. Her voice was ghostly cold as if coming from the depths of a ghost town.

Chu Beijie took a step back and turned to look at the coffin in the room. He forced out a smile, “Impossible, that’s impossible. You’re lying to me because you feel bad for Pingting, so you’re scheming against me.” Even though he said this, it was babbling done through cold sweat. He felt as if he was falling onto ice.

Yangfeng was a very good friend of Pingting, and the two had grown up together. Chu Beijie had met many people, and naturally knew that Yangfeng’s pain was definitely not a lie. He felt a chill that he had never once experienced in his lifetime invade into him. It broke through his skin and cut straight into his bones.

“You’re lying. Pingting is here, hiding.” Chu Beijie laughed, his expression twisted. His eyes flickered and stopped on Ze Yin who was hugging onto Yangfeng.

His hand pressed down on his sword, as if he would cut Ze Yin’s body into numerous pieces if he just said one unfavourable phrase.

Ze Yin didn’t say anything, however, he simply held his bitterly crying wife. He returned Chu Beijie’s gaze.

Chu Beijie’s gaze, apart from determination, honesty, persistence and a little fear, there was also a little pleading bit of hope.

Then in the depths of his eyes, stirring like a storm, it gradually became contaminated with incredible despair.

He could, from his former enemy Ze Yin’s face, see the tiniest trace of sympathy.

“Impossible, that’s impossible...” Chu Beijie felt like his heart had been stabbed by a sharpened knife. He howled once, took several steps back and raised his head to the sky to cry out, “Pingting, Pingting! Hurry up and come out! I’ve come, Chu Beijie has come!”

“I’ve come to apologise to you! You can punish me any way you like! Pingting, come out!”

The hurt beast’s howls shook the mountain forest, causing the gathered snow on the trees to fall off. The entire Songsen Mountains quietly stood as it listened to the bitterly upset shouts of Chu Beijie.

How could this be? How was this possible?

Those dexterous fingers, that unrivaled smile, that intoxicating fragrance and the willowy figure, how could all of it be gone?

He had clearly heard her, the sound of her qin and singing about heroes and beautiful woman surviving the turmoil. She had sung about the rises and falls of monarchs as well as soldiers knowing the resultant fraud. She had passionately sung about longing and how it was a joy to merely look.

She was undoubtedly here, in the snow, fog, clouds and snow. Her smile was ever so elegant and demure. Her black eyes quietly watched him, as if containing endless thoughts that were placed upon himself.

Where? Where was Pingting?

Chu Beijie numbly turned away, looking at that lonely coffin.

“She had already arrived at the foot of the mountain, but met up with wolves. She only had...” Ze Yin lowered his voice, “only had the final bit left to go.”

Yangfeng had gradually calmed down. She stared at Chu Beijie with her very bloodshot eyes, and desolately mourned, “She was here to find me, I knew she would. She was wearing the luminous jade hairpin I gave her. She climbed through the Songsen Mountains, coming from so faraway to see me. Why did I not send someone down the mountain quicker? Why? Why...” She buried her head in Ze Yin’s shoulders, her own trembling uncontrollably.

Chu Beijie dazedly looked at the coffin, completely losing his soul.

As he approached that coffin, every step seemed to be done on clouds. It felt soft, didn’t feel real at all.

Everything was like a dream. The coffin seemed to be nearby, yet suddenly it seemed so far away. The short path drained all of his body’s energy, and he struggled onwards, barely finishing.

He finally touched the coffin and chilling coldness gushed out from it. It spreaded from his fingers to his heart, causing this world-famous Duke of Zhen-Bei to shiver.

“Pingting, you’re in here...” His voice was at its gentlest as it addressed the dark, black coffin.

He wanted to open the box, planning to hug his beloved wife, his Duchess, his Bai Pingting.

But when his ten fingers grasped onto the lid, the always brave Duke of Zhen-Bei could not summon any energy at all. Chu Beijie’s hardened hand from holding swords shook. He tried very hard, but he could not stop shaking for even just one moment.

“She came across wolves. only leaving her clothes, and...” Ze Yin’s fist was tightly clenched as he whispered, “and a few bones.”

Each word weighed as much as a ton, crushing onto Chu Beijie’s heart. His knees could never support his body. He slumped heavily into the ground.

The coffin was both cold and hard. Chu Beijie carefully stroked it.

Pingting was not like that. She was petite, exquisite and in the snow, two red clouds appear on her cheeks. She liked to watch the stars in the night sky and was like a cat, often seeking out his warm broad chest, coming and going freely.

“Pingting...” He stretched out his two arms, doing his best to embrace.

He had come too late, far too late.

He should have hurried back by the sixth and wrapped his arms tightly around the waiting Pingting. He should have hugged her, not letting anything hurt her and push all danger far away from her. He should have let her smile, leisurely read a book in the warm winter sun, take a nap and give her complete freedom so she could carefreely look after their child.

“Marry me.”

“Why?”

“Not only you can play qin and sing well, but you also have nimble hands and own a heart of gold. I’d much rather choose you over many other women.”

“I...”

“I let’s swear to the moon, never turn against each other.”

Never turn against each other?

Where did that never turn against each other go?

“If you live, I live. If you die, I can only accompany you to death.”

Her every smile and frown seemed to be in the air, in the fragrance of flowers.

Always, omnipresent.

“Is Duke going to war?”

“Duke doesn’t need to explain to Pingting. Pingting is no longer concerned about anything apart from Duke now.”

“Pingting passed her birthday alone, so as for Duke’s birthday, could we be together?”

He hadn’t made it and turned against her.

Let her heart break as she boarded on the carriage in the harsh light of sharp swords.

Let her drift to Yun Chang, with his flesh and blood, crossing through the snowy mountains, suffering endlessly.

Let her be surrounded by wolves which tore piece by piece of her flesh and snapped her bones.

“No!” Chu Beijie howled in pain. After that, he resolutely unsheathed his sword.

The precious sword of the Duke of Zhen-Bei that had shook the skies was thrown hard onto the ground. The sword fell with a sonorous crash, causing an instant spark. Chu Beijie slowly turned his head, looking at Yangfeng, “It was I who ruined her, go ahead and kill me.” He didn’t say any more as he raised his head and closed his eyes.

Yangfeng was silent for a long time. She wriggled free of Ze Yin’s embrace and picked up the precious sword from the ground. The precious sword was very heavy, and she could only hold onto it with both hands. Even though she held it with both, the sword still trembled.

The sword pointed at Chu Beijie’s throat and with just one light slice, this world-famous general that every country wanted to get rid of, the Duke of Zhen-Bei, would disappear from this world.

Pitter.

Patter...

The mourning hall was deathly silent, except for Yangfeng’s teardrops. Each was large and dropped endlessly onto the ground.

She hated this man just earlier and wouldn’t have minded dying on her way to killing him. However, now that his sword was against his throat, she was actually trembling.

Pingting, Pingting, this Chu Beijie who made you cry in sorrow and broke your heart is now under my sword.

Has he perhaps ever made you smile in happiness before?

“The world is vast where do you plan to go?”

“I’m going home.”

“Going home?”

“There’s someone waiting for me.” Pingting had smiled faintly, a gentleness and longing in her eyes. She had lifted her hand and touched the hair that had been swept messily by the wind.

Yangfeng clearly remembered Pingting standing by the window. The direction she had gazed was towards Dong Lin, where the Duke of Zhen-Bei was located.

Her hands tightly clasped around the sword shook, and the interlocked fingers gradually loosened. The sword fell to the ground with a “clang” beside Yangfeng’s feet.

Chu Beijie opened his eyes in surprise.

Yangfeng returned his gaze coldly. “I won’t let you go disturb Pingting in the heavens. She doesn’t want to see you.” Her expression was faraway as she reached out to stroke the coffin. Her voice was caring, “Pingting, I know you’re exhausted. From now on, no one will ever hurt you again.”

Chu Beijie stared at the coffin, his heart like ashes.

Inside there lay his most beloved woman, his Duchess and his child’s mother. In this lifetime, he never properly faced Pingting.

Indeed, he was the one who killed her.

Pingting would never forgive him whether it was on earth or in the heavens.

If he died, his begs for forgiveness would be hated, and if he lived, he would be hated for asking her remains.

The unrivalled beauty that he devoted himself to had been ruined in his own hands.

“You’re right...” Chu Beijie’s eyes were empty holes, clay-like, as he slowly rose up from the ground. “You’re right...” He watched the coffin longingly, but no longer had the courage to touch it with his trembling hands.

What right did he have to touch it?

Chu Beijie turned. His eyes could no longer see anything, no Yangfeng, no Ze Yin, and no path.

He forgot his precious sword, forgot everything as he walked out the gates. His gaze was fixed ahead as he walked towards the depths of the mountain forest. His horse, eating hay outside, neighed once before trotting behind Chu Beijie. It didn’t understand why his master entered the cabin and return as if his soul had been lost.

Ze Yin’s men watched the man and horse leave and lowered their voices, “Main General, this man is the greatest enemy of my Bei Mo. Shall we perhaps take this opportunity and...”

Ze Yin watched Chu Beijie’s back view and shook his head, sighing, “He is no longer anyone’s enemy.”

The famous Duke of Zhen-Bei had already died.

His heart was already dead.

Chapter 50

The Bei Mo army had started its journey home.

On the way there, Ruohan received a letter from Ze Yin, passed by the returning messenger.

His fired up battle heart sank at the previously unknown news.

The thin letter in his hands seemed to be very heavy. He sighed as he looked at Sen Rong. "Miss Bai has died." The man who was now the highest ranking general had a layer of frost on his face.

Gone, that remarkably graceful female advisor was gone.

She had died in the cold Songsen Mountains, her remaining bones had been scattered to all directions by wolves. There was only a luminous jade hairpin left behind, gleaming in the snow.

Who knew that strange woman who organised troops in Kanbu and freely interefered with the Dong Lin army would have such a fate?

Sen Rong hesitated for a long time before lowering his voice to ask, "Is this true?"

It was unbelievable, utterly unbelievable.

Bai Pingting, she had once used one song to make several hundreds of thousands retreat away from the Kanbu walls.

Just one song.

"The Main General's wife has also fallen ill." Ruohan hesitated before bitterly smiling, "We were all wrong."

Sen Rong was puzzled.

Ruohan explained, "It was because Chu Beijie didn't know the exact location of Main General Ze Yin's secluded residence, so he intruded into the army camp, saying lies to threaten us. He followed our messenger to find Main General Ze Yin."

Sen Rong's expression changed, "Doesn't that mean..."

"He didn't go to kill anyone but to find someone. He was looking for his Duchess, Bai Pingting."

"Risking his life to enter the army camp was not for national affairs but for love?" Sen Rong was frozen for a long time before he spat out a long breath. "So Chu Beijie attacked Yun Chang for Miss Bai, not simply an excuse, but a true desire."

Ruohan nodded. "Correct. Now that Miss Bai has given her life to the Songsen Mountains, it seems that Chu Beijie's ambition has been ruined. Although my Bei Mo has a deep hatred for him, he is still a truly rare hero in this world."

It was a pity and regrettable.

One was a hero, the other was a beauty.

It was a joke from the gods.

The two generals had both accompanied Pingting during the battle of Kanbu and deeply acknowledged her. After a silence, Sen Rong lowered his voice to say, “No matter what others think, I have to find a place to pray for Bai Pingting tonight. I must get the general in charge of food supplies to prepare some good alcohol and food. Also, I’d like to have the remaining pots of high-quality alcohol in the barracks. Main General, I know that military drinks are not to have alcohol, but could we please drink freely under the moonlight?”

“Why not?” Ruohan mournfully sighed. “Tonight, all of the generals that had participated in the battle of Kanbu shall drink through our pain for the loss of Miss Bai.”

How could they not drink, drink to forget their pain?

Why could this world not accomodate a person like Bai Pingting?

Why was the sky so gray and dark, so much that it was ominous? Or perhaps when one’s eyes were blindfolded and unable will reality be seen?

She had once been like snow, its fragrance had spilled into their nostrils, cleaning their lungs.

She had once been wrapped in colourful clothing as she swirled around on the stage inside the Ducal Residence. She had sung a cappella as she gazed back to look at a crowd of familiar faces. They had stayed behind due to her voice, stopped their footsteps, transfixed while they listened.

Then, it all dispersed.

When? Why? Great sorrow began to heavily press forwards, for unclear reasons. It seemed that there was no reason at all, but a sad destiny that had been the karma of intelligence.

“Miss? Miss?” The voice was faraway.

Pingting opened her eyes, light began to pour into her eyes. They focused on a slightly familiar figure. For a moment, she could not remember where she was.

Where was she? She looked around, looking at her surroundings. Her entire body felt it had been beaten. Even moving a single hair would send her whole body into thundering pain.

“Hm...” Pingting slowly breathed out, waiting for the pain to subside.

Where is my child?

That’s right, my child! She suddenly woke up, widening her eyes. Her hands were pressed on her lower abdomen and she could gently touch the tiny little movements.

“Dong’t worry, we have already fed you with some medicine. You and the child in your belly are all fine,” said a face above hers, laughing cheerfully.

Pingting's suspended heart was put to rest as she looked up at the ceiling. It seemed to have been a long time since she had seen a ceiling. She spent so many days between rocks in the snow and felt that she would never see a ceiling again.

How nice, she had finally been rescued.

"Where is Zuiju? Yangfeng?" Pingting studied her surroundings.

"Who is Zuiju? Yangfeng?" A puzzled expression appeared on the square face before her. Not long later, he grinned and laughed again, "Oh, I know, you're talking about our Main General's wife. Geez Miss, you still haven't found the Main General's wife? It's been so long that even the horse have had their foals, yet you still haven't found them?"

He must be mistaken. Pingting puzzledly looked at that smile when suddenly, she remembered everything. She said, "You're that tall guy I met on the road to Petal College. You're A-Han."

"Hah, Miss remembers me now? That's me! A-Han! You gave me your horse and even left me money to marry a good wife." A-Han chuckled heartily. "Tell you what, I'm married now and expecting a little A-Han soon."

His hearty laughter shook the roof, causing the dust to fly off.

Pingting laughed as well before curiously asking, "Do you not know Zuiju? How did you know I was in the mountains?"

"Just luck. I went up on the mountains to catch some prey to strengthen my wife's body. A gray rabbit was pierced by my arrow yet ran around non-stop before disappearing into a rocky area. I went into look and geez, I saw no gray rabbit but a Miss who was nearly frozen to death." A-Han recounted the story with great vigour and joy.

"You saved me?"

"Of course, of course!" A-Han gestured, "I carried you down the snowy mountains, as well as my bow and the rabbit. Luckily, I have quite a bit of strength. You were really nearly frozen to death and only seemed slightly better after drinking heaps of wild rabbit soup. Heh, wild rabbit soup indeed strengthens the body. I also asked other people to bring some medicine that are good for fetuses and fed it to you. It was originally for my wife though."

Hearing his words, Pingting felt uneasy but immensely grateful.

"Sorry for causing so much trouble."

"Don't worry, my wife is very tough whether it be her skin or bones. The little A-Han she has inside is strong too, so I'm not afraid."

A-Han was proudly saying this when a woman wearing a bulky coat walked into the room. Her belly was protruding widely as she laughed, asking, "A-Han, are you talking to yourself again?"

"Hey, hey, Wife, the Miss is up!" He beckoned the woman over, smugly introducing them to Pingting. "This is my wife." He then pointed at her belly, gleefully saying, "This is little A-Han."

A-Han's wife shared her husband's enthusiasm. She smiled as he pinched his cheeks, "We've run out of firewood, go cut some more." She then turned to Pingting, "You're finally up, Miss. How could you climb the mountains in such cold weather? The Songsen Mountains stand no nonsense. Even men are afraid to go in winter. A-Han is an idiot, how dare he lie to me to go hunt a wild rabbit there."

She then rattled on about a bunch of other things. Perhaps it was because they had saved someone that she appeared to be very happy. She warmly looked at Pingting, "With just another chicken, your cheeks will recover the redness soon."

Yet Pingting was thinking something else.

Had the deadline of three days already passed?

What if the reinforcements had arrived but were unable to find her traces, meaning that Yangfeng and Zuiju would be worried to death?

But, the skies were still merciful and had allowed her and the child to survive.

Dear child, your life is blessed indeed.

Pingting gently stroked her lower abdomen. There was a bump, both soft and hard at the same time. She felt an indescribable sense of fulfilment inside her, the feeling of life.

"A-Han's Wife, I..."

"Are you hungry? I'll bring some food over."

"No, no," Pingting shook her head. A-Han's wife was indeed a very good match to A-Han, for she was as attentive to care as he was, "I want to hurry on my journey."

A-Han's wife widened her eyes. "Hurry on your journey? Where do you want to go like that? No, no, I'm still planning to prepare a chicken for you tomorrow."

"I have to go." Pingting lifted herself from the bed with her palms. "I must find Yangfeng and your Main General Ze Yin."

A-Han was chopping firewood outside and had strained his ears to hear the movement inside. At this moment, his head popped into the window view, as he shouted, "The Main General has gone to live in seclusion. Miss, you won't be able to find him. I heard that even the King cannot find him."

"No, I know where he is. I must hurry over. If they can't find me, they will definitely worry."

Yangfeng and Zuiju would definitely be very worried.

Midwinter was about to pass. Under the shining sun, icy water followed the small ridges, slowly trickling.

Perhaps the snow on the Songsen Mountains would melt the same way?

He Xia took out Yun Chang's Flag of Command, accompanied by his soldiers. In the morning assembly, under the gazes of the hundred officials, he solemnly returned the Flag with both hands. The war had ended and the rights to mobilise the army had been returned to Princess Yaotian.

Gui Changqing watched the Flag of Command in He Xia's hands amongst the crowd. He secretly sighed in relief when he saw that it had returned to the Princess' hands.

Yaotian's feelings towards He Xia were deep and if it hadn't been for the Senior Official's warning over and over again, she would have never sent an Order to take back the Flag.

"Is Prince Consort angry?"

The morning assembly had finished, and Yaotian studied the returned Flag of Command. Her heart was still a little perturbed. She hurriedly asked Luyi to bring He Xia over. Her heart was only settled a little when she saw her husband directly walking towards her.

He Xia was surprised, "Why would He Xia be angry?"

"Yaotian took back the Flag of Command."

He Xia hesitated for the slightest moment before cracking up into laughter. He looked helplessly and pityingly at Yaotian before shaking his head. "Why would Princess think that? We are husband and wife. Even if I am jealous of everyone in the world, I will never be jealous of my own wife." He then took a seat beside Yaotian and held her hand. His expression suddenly became mysterious. He lowered his voice, "The Senior Official wished that Princess would soon have heirs. When will I have Princess' Order, so I may help achieve this?"

Yaotian also leaned forward. She had thought his whispering was because he had something important to say. She had been listening very carefully, only to realise this person was teasing her again. Her cheeks flushed red, and she tilted her head to one side, frowning. She scowled back, "It was just morning assembly, but Prince Consort is not being serious again. If the Senior Official knew, he'd scowl at you for a long time."

"Princess' words are not quite right." He Xia's face was very solemn as he straightened his spine and coughed twice, "Parenthood is one of the most important milestones in life. How could this not be serious, as even the Senior Official has mentioned it a number of times? No matter whether Princess gives an Order or not, I will definitely help."

Yaotian's heart was sugary as if eating a lot of honey. Her face was very red as she replied, "Who else, apart from Prince Consort, could possibly help me anyway?" Her voice was high and soft as a mosquito, almost no one could hear it.

"Heh, then I shall wait for Princess' arrival at the Prince Consort Residence tonight." He Xia was happy and forgot the royal etiquette, planting a fierce kiss on Yaotian's face. He stood up, "I will now go to deal with military affairs. Princess, don't forget our promise tonight."

Yaotian watched him stride away, his posture even more like a dragon. Her lips could no longer conceal her proud smile.

Luyi, who happened to be bringing in lotus syrup, came in and saw Yaotian's expression. She giggled, "As I said before there's no need to bring the lotus syrup in so soon. Princess has just seen the Prince Consort and is completely sweetened. What need is there for external sweetness?"

"Luyi, are you seriously brave enough to make a joke out of me?" Yaotian recovered her spirits and sat dignified. She scolded, "You must have learned that off the Prince Consort." However, she could not uphold her pose and began to laugh again.

That night, Yaotian arrived at the Prince Consort Residence. She got off her horse but did not see He Xia come out. Dongzhuo hurriedly came forward to greet her. "Princess, the Prince Consort has sent me to pass on a message. He has been dealing with national affairs today and will return at some time later. Dinner has been prepared. As the Prince Consort has instructed, they are all dishes that Princess likes to eat. Would you like to eat in the side room of the backyard?"

Hearing that He Xia had not yet returned, Yaotian couldn't help feel a little dismayed. She simply nodded, saying, "I'll leave it to you."

"Then I'll instruct them to take the dishes in the side room of the backyard."

As expected, the dishes were delicious. Yaotian often came to the Prince Consort Residence, so its chefs naturally knew what she liked. They spent a lot of effort in their dishes. The taste was even finer than the Royal Residence's.

However, He Xia was not there and Yaotian had no appetite. She idly moved her chopsticks a few times, raising her head several times to look at the sky as well as ordering Luyi to check things out.

Luyi replied, "I have already sent several people to ask around, even without Princess' order. Although the war is over, there is still things like pensions and rewards, so he remains busy."

Yaotian faintly sighed.

Waiting for a full half hour, Luyi who constantly looked outside finally shouted, "The Prince Consort has returned!"

Yaotian was delighted by this and stood up to gaze outside the window. As expected, she saw the familiar figure valiantly hurrying towards her way. He Xia wiped his sweat the moment he entered the room, smiling while he asked, "Has Princess had dinner yet?"

"Yes, has Prince Consort eaten yet?"

"No time to eat." He Xia handed the white towel he used to wipe sweat off back to the servants before sitting by the table. Yaotian hurriedly ordered the maids to bring over some warm rice and dishes. She personally handed over a pair of chopsticks. He Xia received it and beamed at her. While picking up the food, he explained, "I wanted to return earlier, but if I don't finish today's work, then tomorrow will be even worse. Sorry for making Princess wait; it's all my fault."

"Since military affairs are so busy, then why don't I transfer two officials so some of Prince Consort's load can be shared."

He Xia hurriedly swallowed two gulps of food. He shook his head, "Although we're suffering because there's only a few people working on it, adding two more will bring in additional problems, making us even busier." Seeing Yaotian's confused look, he patiently explained, "Sorting out pensions, rewards and ranking systems are not difficult, but the challenge is that money and grains must be deployed. I don't have any allocation of money or grain specifically as rewards for soldiers, so I must ask for every reward from the national treasury. For every reward, a huge number of officials have to give their approval, as well as huge number of letters to be written. I can wait, but can the soldiers in the army wait? I wasted more than half the day at the national treasury, yet they only approved enough money for five thousand soldiers. I have to go back tomorrow to bargain with them too."

Yaotian had been listening very carefully, her hands holding a pair of chopsticks. She helped He Xia pick up bits of food, while slowly saying, "This is no simple matter. If rewards and pensions are lagging behind, the soldiers will be very unhappy. How could it not shake the army's morale?"

He Xia was clearly tired. One bowl of rice quickly entered his stomach. He beckoned a maid to serve up another. He agreed, "Princess is right. I don't particularly care about this right now, at most it will just make me tired. However, if the army's rewards and pensions lag behind too much, and battle were to suddenly begin, then how would we possibly counter them promptly? Though this time against the Dong Lin army has made us much more familiar with the topography, perhaps we don't need as much time to prepare counters."

He Xia had always been a famous general. Yaotian had dabbled in the government for a while now, so she knew he was right. She did not hesitate and immediately said, "The army indeed needs to have its own treasury and granary. I will see to an Order in tomorrow's morning assembly so that a new one can be built, all of them under Prince Consort. Only by having money and grain can troops be controlled properly."

He Xia chuckled as he advised, "Princess shouldn't so hurriedly give an order. This should be discussed with Senior Official first. If the Senior Official doesn't know in advance, then we'll both get scolded."

"Rest assured, Prince Consort. To things that benefit Yun Chang, Senior Official won't disagree."

After this serious discussion, He Xia finished eating. He comfortably stretched out before squinting at Yaotian. He laughed evilly, "Now that national affairs are all over, it's time to discuss the things between husband and wife. Whatever sweet words Princess would like to hear, please give an Order."

Yaotian mocked him, "Now where did the serious Prince Consort go to? There's no way I would give an Order; you already have far too many sweet words, so much it's hard to eat."

He Xia readily replied, "Fine, then I will never say them again. Princess, don't be hurt by it. Hm, let me think, since I can't say such nice words, then what shall I get to make my beloved wife happy?"

Yaotian saw his brooding look in the flickering candlelight. His eyebrows reached into his temples, and his looks were extraordinary as a delightful evil. Only her confidants, no outsiders, were nearby so she no longer cared about the reserved etiquette of a master of a country. She smiled, her fingertips poking his shoulder, and giggled, "Prince Consort, quit pretending. Judging by your expression, I know you've hidden something nice so I wouldn't know. Hurry up and pass it up, or be aware of my punishment."

He Xia saw her reveal a girly expression and grabbed her wrist. He used his strength, causing Yaotian to shout "Kyaa" as she was helplessly pulled towards him. He Xia held her by the waist, letting her sit on his lap. He stroked her cheeks, "Is the dance pretty?"

"What dance?"

He Xia's shiny obsidian eyes studied Yaotian. He suddenly lowered his head, gently nibbling on Yaotian's necks, earning another "Kyaa". Before she could speak up and criticise him, He Xia teased, "Princess is delighting me again. The Prince Consort Residence recently welcomed a group of Bei Mo dance maids, and each were very pretty. Did no one report such an important matter to Princess? I'm sure there are waves of sourness rolling in someone's stomach...Ow, that hurts..."

Yaotian had fiercely pinched He Xia. She wriggled free of his grasp, twisting her head to say, "Prince Consort is wrong. I am not a woman who feels unjustified jealousy."

He Xia stroked his arm that had been pinched. "Why, if it wasn't jealousy, did you pinch so hard?" He came forwards again, whispering in Yaotian's ear, "Report to Princess, I've been so busy with work that I didn't even see those dance maids. Why not take advantage of tonight and ask them to dance, while we drink to celebrate. That way, you won't endure your jealousy alone."

When Yaotian heard he hadn't seen those women, the joy in her heart was uncontrollable. She turned around, "How interesting. I also want to see how different Bei Mo dancers are." She then massaged He Xia's arm, her face flushed as she asked, "Does it really hurt?"

Perhaps it would've been better if she hadn't asked. The moment she did, He Xia immediately creased his eyebrows, forming a bitter expression. "It hurts, it hurts even more than a wound from swords."

Yaotian couldn't help punch him playfully. She softly scorned, "What famous general, so famous that fills the earth below the skies? Why do I always see a wicked person?"

"You're not my soldier, so why must I be so serious?" He Xia ceased causing trouble and freely laughed, his voice full of pride.

The servants brought the dancers of Bei Mo forwards. They were to dance on a small stone platform in the rear courtyard, while the couple drank and had fun on the pavilion.

That night, the skies decided to be pretty too. The moon hung in the sky, gray and bright, as it shone on the never-melting snow.

The dance maids were all wearing the dance dresses of Bei Mo. They were vividly coloured and had a drum attached to their waist which their dexterous hands hit. Yaotian had never seen such freshness and was very fascinated by them.

He Xia had been depleted of his energy through the day, yet he seemed even better than Yaotian. After the dance had finished, he loudly applauded, praising, "This song was danced well. In dedication to this dance, we must drink three cups."

Yaotian also drank, reflecting him. She brought the cup to her mouth before shaking her head, "Prince Consort, my alcohol tolerance is not as good as yours. Rather than three, just one will do."

He Xia was delighted with his own drinking but didn't force her to do the same. He nodded, "Do as you wish, Princess. However, this dance is much too graceful and deeply clutches a person's soul, therefore I must have three cups to add to the fun."

He consecutively drank two cups before unsheathing his sword.

"Dance of the skies, dream of the vast emptiness, affection is not strong..." His voice was clear and bright, surprisingly very pleasant to the ear.

Yaotian had often listened to He Xia's sweet talk, yet she never knew that he sung so decently. Surprise leaked into her eyes.

However He Xia stopped just after one phrase, refusing to continue. He stopped his sword, turned his head, laughing. "The waist-drum dance just now was very nice to look at. Are there any more dances that uses those drums? Choose another song and dance on."

Without their notice, the moon passed half the sky, and the alcohol was soon depleted. Most of it had entered He Xia's stomach. Although he had good alcohol tolerance, he was still a little tipsy at that moment.

Yaotian was afraid that drinking too much would harm his health. She softly advised, "Although the dance is good, we have already had enough fun. Shall we go back to rest in the room?"

He Xia had no intention of putting down his cup, but he always obeyed every little thing Yaotian said so he immediately put it down. "True, it's time to rest. Princess is tired too."

He stood up, dismissing the maids and other manservants. He carried Yaotian, entering the room together.

The two had caused trouble for most of the night, and the servants were very sleepy. Finally seeing their two masters about to sleep, they secretly cheered in their hearts. The Bei Mo maids were even more delighted. They waited for He Xia and Yaotian enter the room, watching the lights go one by one before packing up. Not long later, the backyard bustling a moment ago immediately became deserted.

Only the moon did not change. It remained round and big as it hung in the sky like before.

The cool air of the residence was flowing slowly.

Dongzhuo had been exhausted by the day too. His eyes closed, deep in sleep on his bed. For some reason, he was suddenly jolted awake. His eyes flickered towards the sky outside and saw the moon was still in the sky, suggesting that he hadn't slept for long.

He couldn't help think of Pingting.

Pingting really liked to admire the moon—not only the moon but also the stars. He wondered where she was.

Thinking that much, his drowsiness was completely gone. Dongzhuo struggled to climb out of his bed and went out of his room. A gust of cold wind happened to greet him, causing him to wildly shiver twice.

It seemed that the wind was bringing something.

Dongzhuo thought it was strange. He stepped forwards and strained his ears. Yes, there was a sound. He began to walk, ending up at the backyard. The sound of metal cutting the wind was much louder. When he raised his head, he couldn't help being stunned.

The moon hung in the sky, causing a cold gleam on the metal of the sword.

In the deserted backyard, there was an agile silhouette on the snow.

“Master...” Dongzuo softly said.

He Xia didn't seem to know there was someone around him. His eyes flashed, his sword going everywhere, leaving a bright white trail.

Dongzuo saw He Xia skillfully swinging his sword, ripping the air in the yard. It seemed that he was venting out all of the heaven and earth's grievances. Dongzhuo didn't dare open his mouth to bother him, just quietly stood there.

No one could bother He Xia right now.

His sword was in his hand.

The famous general, the Marquess of Jing-An and the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, currently had his sword in his hand.

Under the bright moon, his waving sword became a dance.

It seemed his whole life was reflected in that cold gleam of the sword.

Each turn was carefully maneuvered, with the energy of a dragon, with swordsmanship of a hero and majesty of the mountains.

After the entire set of Jing-An sword techniques had been danced, He Xia's forehead was already soaked in warm sweat. His single layer was stuck to his body as he sheathed his sword. He then turned towards Dongzhuo with no trace of expression on his face. His voice was light, “Bei Mo has brought the news. Pingting is gone.” He then took the sword, heading to the room where Yaotian was. He lightly pushed open the door and stepped inside.

The door then shut quietly.

Dongzhuo stood in the wind, shocked.

The courtyard was cool.

It was simply still, and the sleeping people remained in their dreamland.

The sound of drums began to sound from afar, making the silence seem even more silent than it was.

Pingting.

That Sister Pingting, who had such an endearing smile and liked to watch the moon, is gone.

Chapter 51

“Nice death, long overdue.” Incense filled the air. In the smoke, the Queen of Gui Le had a trace of a sneer as she leisurely replied, “That servant is quite skillful to have poisoned the two princes of Dong Lin and to seduce Chu Beijie. Forget her long friendship with the Marquis of Jing-An, who knew that even the generals of Bei Mo would mourn for her. Hmph, are all the people under the skies crazy?”

“Madam is right.” Le Di stroked his beautifully trimmed beard. “Bai Pingting is indeed nothing, but when Chu Beijie learned of her death, he was deeply hurt. He is now devastated, which is deeply important to the current situation of the four countries.”

“Devastated?” The Queen was stunned for a moment. Her gaze became a little sad. She couldn’t help sigh, “There really seems to be a true hearted man in this world, yet why is it that Bai girl who gets him? If our King had half of the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s heart, then I would be dearly blessed.”

“Madam, don’t pity Chu Beijie yet. There is still something that needs to be done first.”

“What?”

Le Di pushed open the window, looking left and right before closing it again. He stepped until he was in front of the Queen and lowered his voice, “Madam, do you still remember Fei Zhaoxing?”

The Queen thought for a while, until she remembered. “Isn’t he one of Brother’s subordinates? That time when the King sent people to hide in Dong Lin so they could ambush He Xia and Bai Pingting’s carriages, we sent him to He Xia so...”

“Yes.”

“What’s wrong, hasn’t this person been disposed yet?”

“If he was disposed already, then what need is there to feel worried? Having mentioned this, it’s all thanks to your brother who doesn’t live up to expectations.” Le Die sighed, saying, “Your brother’s heart is not hard enough. He simply thought that if they grew up together through childhood, then he would be considered a confidant. He did not find someone to kill him when he came back, only asking someone to give him money so he could hide somewhere far away.”

The Queen's expression changed, "How could Brother be so muddled? How could he have pity about such a thing? Sigh, even if Brother isn't thoughtful enough, Father should at least teach Brother a lesson."

This matter was both important and not. However if it were to blow out of proportion, then it was a national treason that would result in the destruction of their family.

Le Di clenched his eyebrows. "How could I not teach him a lesson? You Brother listened to me and immediately sent someone to find Fei Zhaoxing. However, who knew he was that clever and left no trace behind."

The Queen secretly thought that both her father and brother were incompetent, but she herself had no choice on the matter. She coldly replied, "That Fei Zhaoxing has always been as slick as ghost since young. If he were suspicious and retreated to the mountains, then how could it possibly be easy getting rid of him?"

"As long as he lives, our worries will never be put to rest. If the King finds him..."

"I know." The Queen pondered for a while before instructing, "I will send someone to deal with Fei Zhaoxing. Father, go find Brother and tell him to not care about anything, just properly lead the troops and win over the other generals. As long as we have a good grasp on the military power, even the King cannot do anything about our Le Family. Hmph, with such a lesson right under our nose, there is no way we will learn the blind loyalty of the House of Jing-An. They worked hard all their lives, only to be destroyed."

Le Di nodded, "Madam is right." He suddenly thought of something else, and he asked, "Does the King already know the news of Bai Pingting's death?"

"Who else under the skies doesn't know that, after the generals of Bei Mo mourned for her?" This thought made the Queen very angry, but at least her own father was the only one around, so she didn't hide it at all. She gritted her teeth, "I don't know what ability that servant woman has. She certainly isn't a beauty either. When the King found out she died, he didn't speak the whole day. I heard the King was planning to give his Order, speaking how her qin skills are Gui Le's national treasure therefore she is to have the title of Gui Le's Goddess of Qin as well as a statue erected for her. Isn't this a joke?"

Le Di was very worried by this, "Madam, the King's actions seems to be a warning."

The Queen's expression slightly darkened as she helplessly sighed. "Of course I know that. Now that the House of Jing-An is gone, our Le Family has become more and more powerful. Look, how many people in the courts who led troops are not nominated by you and Brother? Back then, the King managed to endure the Yangfeng incident, yet today, he dislikes me as the Queen even more for Bai Pingting."

"Come to think of it, Madam is quite intelligent." Le Di studied his daughter's expression as he carefully proceeded, "The King is the sole master of the nation, therefore it is common that he has beautiful women around him. What is it for Madam to be a little more generous and let someone like that Li'er who came a few years ago become a Concubine? Yet, you forced the King to give her to the King of Dong Lin."

The Queen harrumphed, "How did I not help her? With the King of Dong Lin, she was raised to Concubine Li and even gave birth to a princess. Father doesn't need to say any more. I am annoyed right now so nothing will work well with me and yet Father still tries to annoy me even more."

Le Di knew his daughter was jealous and sighed to himself. He still wanted to continue urging her but suddenly heard the sound of footsteps approaching. He quickly stopped the conversation. He sat where he was originally and held the teacup he had yet to drink from. The Queen's closest maid, Yangrong, called from the outside. "Madam, the King has sent a messenger."

“Come in.” The Queen allowed the manservant to enter. She drank her tea while asking, “What does the King have to say?”

“Report to Madam, the King has already made his Order. Bai Pingting will be given the title of the Qin Goddess of Gui Le and will have a statue erected in her memory at the Royal Residence main gates in three days. The King said that Madam is to be welcomed that day too, so that the two of you can worship together. This way, an example of how Gui Le women should do can be set.”

Halfway through, the Queen had almost crushed the cup in her hand to a fine powder. She was trembling with anger. Le Di anxiously studied her expression beside her, dearly hoping that his daughter could have some patience.

The Queen swallowed her anger down and chuckled lightly, “Understood. Three days, Royal Residence main gates, correct? Go tell the King that I will prepare accordingly.”

The manservant took her message and immediately went to report back.

Le Di closed the door. When he turned, he saw that his daughter’s expression changed.

“As expected, as expected! It’s that Bai Pingting again, even her soul refuses to give us a rest!” The Queen was grinding her delicate white teeth. “What on earth did she do that makes everyone do so much for her? How could a dignified King, who sent his Order to give a title to a petty maid, explain such an action to Gui Le’s peasants?”

Le Di’s expression was also downcast. He thought even further, “The King plans to do the same thing he did to the House of Jing-An to our Le Family. Although the House of Jing-An is no more, the people of Gui Le have not forgotten them. The House of Jing-An was convicted by the King, therefore he can’t directly use the name of the House of Jing-An. He can only use one of their loyal maids, marking the maid that accompanied He Xia.”

“Father is right.” The Queen had calmed down, and her tone had slowed. She hesitated before bitterly laughing, “But I definitely won’t believe that the King is only interested in raising her status without feeling anything towards Bai Pingting.”

“Hasn’t she died?”

“It’s worse if she’s dead.” The Queen’s long nails left long white scratches in the armrest of her wooden chair. “A man’s heart that cannot have what it wants is the strongest.”

There was nothing less reasonable, but at the same time, there was nothing more reasonable.

Bai Pingting’s death had spread throughout the world.

A maid serving a Ducal Residence had shocked the world.

She was the Qin Goddess of Gui Le, He Xia’s maid, the former highest ranking Bei Mo army official and at the same time, the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s wife.

Although they didn’t have a formal marriage, everyone who met her or the Duke of Zhen-Bei understood she was undoubtedly the sole wife in that indomitable hero’s lifetime.

Bai Pingting was gone.

Where was Chu Beijie?

Where was the former unrivalled general?

The Queen of Dong Lin stared at the people in front of her, taking in a deep breath. She resolutely said, "Genius Doctor Huo, there is no outsider here. There is no need to hide anything, just speak the truth."

"Report to Queen, the King's illness..." In just a few months, Dong Lin's genius doctor Huo Yunan seemed to have aged ten years. White strands had mixed into his black beard. "I'm afraid he can't last much longer."

"Tell me the truth, how long does he have?"

"I'm afraid...afraid no longer than seven days."

The Queen was stunned by this. It was a long time before her floating spirit could be collected in her body again. Her backbone could no longer support her body after hearing this news, causing it to soften. She could only lean against the back of the chair to support herself. With the final thread of hope, she seemed to be praying at this famous doctor of Dong Lin that could direct the fate of a person's life and death. "Is it possible to lengthen those few days to a few months?"

"Queen." Even though Huo Yunan did not want to, he had to say it clearly. He steeled himself and said, "All methods have been used. After the King, there's..."

"Madam, Madam!" The conversation was suddenly interrupted by a maid running into the room. She bowed at the queen before hurriedly saying, "Madam, the King has awoken and is looking for Madam."

The Queen suddenly stood up, yet her sight blackened. She toppled, almost stumbling.

"Madam!"

"Queen!"

The maid and Huo Yunan exclaimed simultaneously as they both reached out to support her.

The Queen rubbed her temples and gained her footing, "It's fine."

Her face was very pale and so were her lips.

Ever since she heard the news of Bai Pingting's death, her face never recovered its colour once.

Everything was ruined.

In Bai Pingting's belly, there was the blood of the Royal House of Dong Lin.

Until now, the King and the Duke of Zhen-Bei had not had any males.

How did this happen? How on earth did this happen?

Back when Bei Mo and Yun Chang's three hundred thousand threatened their borders, why had they not expected such a fate today?

Her body and mind were almost shrivelled from her regrets. More problems kept surfacing before her. What karma did the Royal House of Dong Lin have with Bai Pingting in their past lives? This was too entangled, unable to be cleared.

She hurriedly rushed to the bedroom where the man she had accompanied for all her life rested on the bed.

He too was once a hero of indomitable spirit. He was like the Duke of Zhen-Bei, who could wield a sword, chug down alcohol immediately and laugh heartily.

“King, I am here.” The Queen sat by the bed, lightly holding onto his hand.

He was so thin, so thin that his bones could be seen. So thin, it made her heart ache.

The Queen’s nose was sour and she couldn’t stop her tears flowing. “What does the King need?”

The King of Dong Lin’s eyes were already blank and without light.

“Where is Brother? Has Brother returned?” His voice was hoarse as he asked.

“I have already asked someone to look. The Duke of Zhen-Bei will return soon.”

The King of Dong Lin raised his head with difficulty as he looked at his own wife. “Queen, if you want to cry, cry.” Although his voice was hoarse and without energy, it was enveloped in warmth. “I understand in my heart that Beijie will never return.”

“King!”

“Bai Pingting, Yun Chang and Bei Mo’s three thousand that pressured the borders, as well as the Order to transfer the general of the Dragon Tiger Barracks. We...” He gasped for breath, “Our three countries used our military power to drag his wife to her death.”

“It’s all my fault...”

“No need to blame yourself.” The King of Dong Lin held onto his Queen’s hand. He squeezed it fiercely for a moment, as if seeming to transfer his final strength into his wife. “Queen is not to be blamed but the arrangement from the skies. The things we worried the most about have finally happened. Brother has always been stubborn, and I hoped that I could scrape him into being a little more indifferent. If anyone’s at fault, it is me.” He then turned around, gasping as he ordered, “You can all go. Senior Official, please guard the door.”

“Yes.” Chu Zairan had been guarding by the King of Dong Lin’s side. He had a great many experiences and knew the King of Dong Lin was about to say his farewells. His tears couldn’t help fall as he slumped down, knocking his head onto the ground. He then strided out of the room, closing the door behind him.

In the bedroom, only the King and Queen of Dong Lin remained.

“Queen, open that jade box at the head of this bed. Pass the Order in there for me.

The Queen took out the Order and softly advised, “King is unwell, so no need to be worried by national affairs right now. Leave this to the Senior Official to deal with, okay?”

The King of Dong Lin shook his head slowly. “Open it.”

The Queen saw that his attitude remained firm, so she didn't insist further. She opened the Order and lowered her head to read. She read the headline, which said "Order to make the Queen in charge of the politics" in wide words. She was deeply shocked and said, "King, absolutely not..."

"This is my will."

"King, the Duke of Zhen-Bei will definitely return. He is the King's own brother and is part of the Dong Lin Royal House. There is no way he could give up his country for just a single woman."

"Queen..." The King of Dong Lin's voice was suddenly very soft as he strained to focus his eyes. He looked at the Queen, "Forget the Order. Come, sit by my side."

Hearing such gentleness, the Queen's heart broke even more. She obediently sat next to him. When she saw the King of Dong Lin reach out, she hurriedly brought her own hands to hold his.

"Queen, I have a question."

"King, please ask. Anything is fine, I will answer."

The King of Dong Lin's voice was getting quieter and quieter. Looking very feeble, he murmured, "This is not a military or national affair. It is simply a personal question that I have wanted to ask Queen for a long time, but it's a little stupid. Now it has come to this, if I don't ask, I will never be able to hear the answer."

The Queen turned her head, quietly wiping away her tears. She softened her voice, "Please ask, King."

"Queen, our marriage was arranged by the former king. As a result, our fate as husband and wife were sealed, without any obstacles." The King of Dong Lin raised his head and studied the Queen, asking, "If we were like Chu Beijie and Bai Pingting, born between enemy countries and in positions directly opposing each other, would the Queen...still be willing to stay by my side for an entire lifetime?"

The Queen thought for a long time, before lightly spitting out one word, "Yes."

An entire lifetime.

Yes, she would, except it would be hard to do.

Even if the highest power interfered with them? If born as enemies, yet love attracted them, who would be the first to betray the other?

Was country more important, or would love be unbearable and one would head straight for their beloved's embrace?

Fortunately, they were not Chu Beijie and Bai Pingting.

But what if they were?

What if this misfortune had fallen on them?

The Queen closed her eyes, clutching tightly onto her husband's big, bony hand.

Yes, although it would be hard, like comparing the lightning in the skies and swords.

But, she would.

“We are in enemy countries,” The King of Dong Lin said.

“Yes.”

“In positions directly opposing each other.”

“Yes.”

“For an entire lifetime?”

The Queen was silent for a long time.

But she still spat out the one word, “Yes.”

The King of Dong Lin sucked in a deep breath. Winter was almost over, and the air brought a scent of Spring. Its coldness pleasantly swelled in his chest.

Yes, she would.

He closed his eyes.

A blessed smile played on his lips.

Several days later, Ruohan’s messenger had arrived at the Songsen Mountains again.

The snow on the ground had already melted, while small green buds of grass had popped out from the earth. Winter had not yet fully come, but everyone’s hearts were full of joyful longing.

The messenger not only brought the finest herbs Ruohan had collected from everywhere but also brought greetings from the King of Bei Mo.

“This millennium old ginger is a gift from the King.”

Ze Yin accepted it gratefully as he bowed in the direction to the distant Royal Residence.

The messenger was also one of Ze Yin’s former subordinates. Once he had conveyed his message and finished his gift delivery, he couldn’t help asking with concern. “Main General, is Missus...feeling better?”

Ze Yin shook his head slightly, his expression sad. “If there was just a little sign of improvement, then I would be much less worried. This is a sickness of the heart, meaning it’s not easy to cure.”

After Pingting was buried, Yangfeng held the luminous jade hairpin as she stood at the grave for a whole night, getting sick soon after.

The hairpin had flashed in the darkness as the undertakers covered it with yellow mud.

“Pingting’s death started with me.”

Pingting was such a clever person and clearly broke free, leaving He Xia and Chu Beijie. She had ridden a horse, alone, to reach Bei Mo. She wanted to look for her, to forget her previous misfortunes. Yet she herself had just knelt, said a few words and went Pingting between the camps of the Bei Mo army and Chu Beijie.

The two armies had confronted each other, angry and ready to murder. Everything had started from there.

It had then spread to the dense forest of a hundred acres, to the Royal Residence of Dong Lin, to the secluded residence, to the Prince Consort Residence of Yun Chang, and finally in the snowy terrain of the Songsen Mountains.

Why did such a leisure and cheerful person like Pingting meet with such fate that even her bones were missing?

Yangfeng couldn't forgive herself.

All sorts of misfortunes —she was the cause yet Pingting was the effect.

"Yangfeng, my beloved wife, do you still remember our child?" Ze Yin carefully supported her upwards. "You can't leave Qing'er. You promised me that you will always be with me in our lifetime. Cheer up and drink this medicine."

"Qing'er..." Yangfeng's eyes turned slightly.

"He keeps on crying for his mother. Yangfeng, don't blame yourself any more. Even if you ruin your own life, what can it do to bring her back? She will definitely disapprove of your actions up in heaven. Come, drink some medicine and get better soon." Ze Yin held the bowl of warm medicine in his hands and tested it first before giving bring it to Yangfeng's lips, "Drink, just think of it for Qing'er."

Yangfeng's chest felt empty. The image of Pingting's remains and her loney grave in the snow floated in her mind, not stopping for a single moment. After Ze Yin's words, a glimmer of sanity due to motherhood returned to her eyes at the mention of Qing'er.

She slowly raised her eyes and looked at her husband.

This person was once the Main General of Bei Mo. His face seemed distressed. It was heartbreaking.

It was all because of her.

She sadly sighed and opened her lips.

Ze Yin heard her drink down the medicine and was delighted. "This is a prescription that Ruohan sent to search for. It's been boiling for a long time now, so drink slowly and don't choke." He supported Yangfeng with one hand, the other holding the bowl. When he saw that Yangfeng had indeed drank the entire bowl of medicine, half of his worries were put to rest. He finally softened his voice, "Ruohan also said that this prescription needs to be given for a whole week..."

His words had yet finished, when Yangfeng shook in his arms. She suddenly straightened up, as she gurgled out on the side of the bed. All of the black soup that just entered her stomach was spilled all over the floor. Yangfeng seemed to have spit out all of her internal organs too. Her face was very pale. When she finally managed to raise her head, she began to fall straight down towards the bed.

"Yangfeng!" Ze Yin hurriedly grabbed onto her. He saw her eyes were tightly closed in his arms and her usual warm face had no trace of colour. His heart ached so much he had no idea to do, almost bringing him to tears. "My wife, what was that for? Does your heart only have Bai Pingting and not have Qing'er and me?"

Yangfeng had difficulty breathing. Hearing Ze Yin's voice, she opened her eyes slightly. She bitterly smiled, "Of course I do. However, this sickness of the heart is too deep and can no longer be saved by medicine. We were brought up together and are like sisters, yet I...I killed her."

“Don’t cry, don’t cry any more. Already so sick, such grief will cause...” Ze Yin’s large rough hand gently wiped away the tears on her face but ended up wiping much more than expected.

His heart was both anxious and upset. His tiger-like eyes couldn’t help become red.

Yangfeng burst into tears and wheezed for a long time. She lifted her head again, looking at Ze Yin bitterly, “It’s not that I don’t feel bad about father and son, but just look at me. It seems that I’m about to accompany Pingting soon. The royal courts are just as dangerous as the battlefields, I don’t want Qing’er to follow the same road Pingting and Chu Beijie took. You have to promise to stay in this secluded forest and keep it, so that you will never leave this mountain and Qing’er will never come across such things. ...Promise me.”

Ze Yin listened to her words, which sounded ominously like her dying will. His entire body broke into a cold sweat and he could only hug Yangfeng tightly. He urged, “What rubbish are you sprouting? I won’t promise, I won’t promise anything!”

“Husband, I won’t last until spring.”

“Rubbish!”

“I can’t accompany you to admire the flowers or sew clothes for Qing’er...”

“Rubbish!”

“I am going to see Pingting and beg for her forgiveness...”

“Rubbish! Rubbish! Don’t say anymore!”

Ze Yin hugged tightly onto Yangfeng, restraining his sobs. He suddenly heard some rapid footsteps from outside the house and apparently there was someone running wildly in the corridor. His uneasiness suddenly became as he growled, “Who’s out there? Are you all deaf, did I not say not to disturb Madam?”

The door curtain rose, and a manservant ran inside. His expression was very strange as he wiped his sweat while saying to the furious Ze Yin, “Main General, someone wants to see you.”

“I’m not seeing anyone! Scram!”

“S-She...”

“Madam needs silence. Whoever it is, just scram!”

“S-S-She...” The manservant was frowning, as if he didn’t believe what he was about to say at all, “She said that she was Bai...Bai Pingting!”

Bai Pingting?

Ze Yin and Yangfeng, suddenly wide-eyed, were both shocked.

How was this possible?

Even though Ze Yin had been on the battlefield for many years and encountered all sorts of unusual situations, he was so dazed that he had no idea for the longest time what to do. He shouted, “Hurry, hurry and welcome her in!”

“Husband...” Yangfeng nervously leaned in his chest

Hearing the news, it felt like her disease had retreated thirty miles. Yangfeng's eyes had gained some fresh colour as she timidly stare at the door curtain.

Ze Yin's eyes were as big as round as saucers too. He couldn't help feel worried and secretly thought that if she was a fake, she would deal significant harm to Yangfeng's heart. No matter who the imposter was, he would chop her up into pieces immediately.

Yet who had such courage to pretend to be Bai Pingting in front of Yangfeng?

Not to mention, it was strange how an imposter would know the location of their secluded residence.

During his uneasiness, there was already movement in the corridor. The curtain then began to slowly rise.

Yangfeng's five fingers tightly grabbed onto Ze Yin's clothes as she forced herself to look at the doorway. As the curtain lifted, the light sprinkled through the doorway enter the room. It dazzled the people inside and Yangfeng could only see little flowers before a face became printed into her eyes.

"Yangfeng, why are you sick?" That gentle voice was very familiar. Just hearing one word was enough to make people cry.

Yangfeng's caught her breath as she studied the face before her very carefully. She finally exhaled, saying, "Oh god..." The single breath wrestled out the rest of her energy, and her body softened as it fell back into Ze Yin's arms.

Pingting was taken aback. "Yangfeng! What's wrong?"

"Wife, Wife!"

The two people hurriedly shouted over and over again, and the servants brought over a warm towel. The towel was placed on Yangfeng's forehead. She slowly woke up, her eyes pinned on Pingting as if afraid that just a blink would make her disappear. Her voice was soft as she exclaimed, "Pingting, you're still alive? Oh God, for once you are merciful."

"Did you all think I died? No wonder when the servants looked at me, their gazes were all weird." Pingting's face was apologetic, "It's all my fault for not keeping the promise of three days. You and Zuiju were all worried to death that I wasn't found, right? Where's Zuiju? Bring her over so her worries may be put back to rest soon."

"Who's Zuiju?"

Pingting hesitated. "Did she not come to you?"

Ze Yin and Yangfeng had a very strange expression. They shook their heads together.

Pingting knew that something was wrong. She hurriedly asked, "If you didn't see Zuiju, didn't send help into the mountains, didn't find my traces, how did you guess I was dead?"

"We found a woman's clothes and bones torn to bits by wolves at the foot of the mountain, alongside the luminous jade hairpin Yangfeng gave you. Yangfeng knew that..."

"Oh God..." Pingting had completely stiffened. She covered her mouth as her eyes widened. Several moments later, she gave a piercing cry of grief, "Zuiju!"

The storm on the Songsen Mountains seemed to relav

As if in a trance, Zuiju turned around, holding onto her silver needles. The tip of the silver needles gleamed alongside the glowing snow. It got brighter and brighter as if this single needle could light up the entire world.

After the brightness, the world suddenly became dark. Pingting felt immense fatigue, her field of vision becoming blurry. Her knees then collapsed as she fell towards the ground.

Yangfeng was startled. "Pingting! Pingting! What's wrong?" She struggled off the bed to look.

Ze Yin was terrified she would trip and supported her, "Yangfeng, be careful..."

"Don't worry about me, go look at her! Hurry!"

Ze Yin picked up the fainted Pingting, ordering, "Doctor, bring the doctor over!"

"Hurry hurry, bring the best ginseng here."

"Madam, that's for you..."

Now that Yangfeng had seen Pingting, the root of her illness was gone and so she was much better. She creased her eyebrows, "How could I be sick when Pingting is still alive? Hurry!" She ordered them. Only until she saw the servants bring out the ginseng did she finally relax. After all, she was sick for a long time and suddenly felt her heart jump too much. Her limbs were drained of energy. She feebly instructed a small maid, "Go, boil my medicine too and then give it to me."

Alive.

Yeah, all were still alive.

Chapter 52

It was very warm.

After enduring the wind and snow of the Songsen Mountains, as well nights under rocks and snow, this thick cotton blanket was very warm.

The broken bone remained painful, and it was enough to jolt a person in coma.

She opened her eyes and couldn't help reach out to touch her wound at her leg. Someone had clumsily bandaged it for her, and she could smell the fragrance of the herbs from inside it.

However, she kept on thinking something was wrong. Her eyebrows remained clenched as she reached into the blankets, but all she felt on her fingertips was smooth, naked skin.

"Ah..." Zuiju was surprised and quickly retracted her hand.

"Ah," mocked a man standing in the shadows of a dark corner in the room.

Zuiju widened her eyes. "Where are my clothes?"

“In the snow.”

That's right, snow, Yangfeng, get help...

Pingting...

Damn, Pingting!

She hurriedly touched her hair, but it was empty.

“Where is my luminous jade hairpin?” Zuiju anxiously asked.

“In the snow. I even painstakingly went on to find a woman's corpse and put it with that. But, maybe more than a half has already entered a wolf's stomach.”

“How long has it been?”

“How long has what been?”

Zuiju was very worried about Pingting. She hurriedly asked, “How long has it been since you cornered me into a wolf pack? Half a day? A day? You left my clothes and hairpin in the snow? How can I get it back? I have to get it back.”

“Half a month.”

“What?” Zuiju looked at the corner in disbelief.

Fanlu stepped out from the corner, his exquisite light crossbow still in his hands. The corners of his mouth lifted, “The snow on the streets have already melted. You've been sleeping for half a month.”

It felt as if Zuiju's chest had been smashed with a hammer. She was almost unable to breathe. She shook her head, “Impossible, that's impossible.”

Three days, Pingting had said, she would wait for three days.

She was waiting in a rocky area of the Songsen Mountains and her pulse was not steady.

“I've had enough of your shouting. How could I take you around if you weren't conscious?”

“You...”

He stopped her, asking, “I saved your life, why are you not thanking me?”

Zuiju fiercely glared at him. She was silent for a while before she shouting through clenched teeth, “You bastard! Damn you! Damn you to hell! Why did you harm me? Why did you save me? I am going to kill you! Kill you!”

She cursed him for a little under half an hour, until she panted, exhausted. Her wound on her leg began to sting again, so she could only stop. She hugged the blanket on the bed as she gasped for breath.

Who knew what that Fanlu's thick skin was made of. No matter how terrible her insults were, he just stood there, listening, with an indifferent expression. After hearing Zuiju cease, he immediately asked, “Had enough?”

“No!” There was no way Zuiju’s anger had calmed. She suddenly raised her head, gritting her teeth to continue, “You scumbag, you six year-old toothless brute who only eats eggs...”

She had always been sharp tongued, and she even brought out all sorts of curses from the various four countries.

Fanlu listened and listened until a smile gradually formed on his face. He even insolently dared to lean against the wall as he watched her. Zuiju hated him even more. She took a deep breath and cursed even louder. He listened cheerfully for a while, and suddenly retrieved his smile. His face became serious, “That’s enough. If you yell any more, I’ll pull your blanket.”

“You...” Zuiju hesitated and actually stopped.

She wasn’t afraid of death, but she was completely naked underneath the blanket right now. If he pulled her blanket, he would see everything. It was so shameful, she couldn’t even face death. There weren’t many women under the world who were not afraid of such a threat.

Fanlu watched her and couldn’t help but smirk evilly again.

Zuiju was silent for a long time. She seemed to soften. Her voice was harsh, “I don’t appreciate you saving my life, just go ahead and kill me.” Her anger had gone, and her sadness had enveloped her heart. She shrank back in the bed and turned away.

Pingting had been in the mountains for half a month. Perhaps she was no longer in the world. Zuiju couldn’t stop the tears from pouring out of her eyes, though she held some hope in her heart. She thought of how this enemy thought of herself as Bai Pingting, meaning there was one less person in the Songsen Mountains trying to harm Pingting. Perhaps the sky had pity, letting Pingting survive. Thinking that much, she dearly wanted to fly to the Songsen Mountains to look. But like this, how could she go?

This secret was something she mustn’t tell this wicked man.

Her tears rolled down her cheeks like a broken string of pearls.

Fanlu watched her huddled, seeming even more petite on the bed. Her shoulders constantly shook. It appeared she was crying, yet he didn’t care. He turned to walk out of the room, returning soon after with a plate of food.

“Eat something.”

Zuiju didn’t have the appetite and bitterly detested Fanlu. She gritted her teeth and remained silent.

Fanlu saw that she didn’t move and knew what she was thinking. He coldly said, “I am not begging you, I am ordering you. Obediently eat, or don’t blame me if I show no pity.”

Zuiju felt the blanket that covered her body fall slightly. She hurriedly flipped and sat up, clutching tightly to the blanket. She was both scared and angry, “You...what do you want?”

The corners of Fanlu’s mouth rose to a smile, yet his eyes were unusually cruel. “I painstakingly saved you, fed you rice porridge everyday on the road. I don’t know how much effort I spent. If you’ve really made up your mind to die, then you might as well pay me back a bit.”

Zuiju saw him reach out his hand and hurriedly scooted further into the bed. Her eyes were full of fear.

Fanlu only intended to frighten her and only stretched out a little before stopping, returning his hand to his chest. He continued to lazily lean against the wall. He beckoned to the meal by the bed with his chin. “Eat it all.”

Zuiju's distinct black and white eyes became slightly bloodshot. She glared fiercely at him until he seemed to move again. She reluctantly gave up and picked up the bowl, eating the food in tiny mouthfuls.

In the snowy mountains, she had been more hungry than not, and when she was out, all she had was rice porridge. Although she was very worried and angry, just after two mouthfuls, her entire stomach began to growl again. The more she ate, the better it tasted. In the end, she had not only finished the entire bowl of rice but also the other two dishes.

As she put down the plate, she raised her head, only to realise that hateful guy had been watching her eat all along. She scowled at him. She was afraid that Fanlu would really take away her blanket and didn't dare yell any more apart from giving him a fierce glare.

"Do you glare at the Duke of Zhen-Bei like that?" Fanlu suddenly asked.

Zuiju hesitated for a while and remembered he thought she was Bai Pingting. She pursed her lips, knowing that she would never clearly explain to Fanlu. "It's none of your business."

Fanlu didn't say anything, just quietly assessed Zuiju.

His gaze was both impolite and bold. Even though Zuiju clutched tightly to her blankets, she still had the wrong impression that he was trying to see her naked body underneath. She endured it for a while, until she couldn't stand it any longer. She returned Fanlu's gaze and challenged, "What are you looking at?"

Fanlu didn't reply, just stared at her for another while. He then said, "Rumours has it that you're not beautiful, but I think you're not too bad."

Zuiju's heart jolted at this. She looked at him warily, her ten fingers grasping the blanket even tighter.

The two did not speak. The air began to thicken, causing it to be more difficult to breathe than usual.

Fanlu didn't walk away. He just continued to assess Zuiju in silence.

Zuiju thought his gaze was even scarier than a wolf's, causing all of her hairs to rise. She suddenly felt something hard hit her backbone, only to realise that she had unwittingly retreated to the other side of the bed. She was now against the wall.

"Where is this?" Zuiju opened her mouth to ask.

Fanlu's mouth twitched, but he didn't answer.

Zuiju secretly fumed. "What are you smiling for?"

Fanlu replied, "I am betting with myself whether you would talk to me within the burning of one stick of incense. As expected, you did." His evil smirk revealed his white teeth. "Are you afraid of me?"

"Hmph, dream on."

Her words had yet to fall when Fanlu suddenly rushed forwards like a wild beast.

"Ah!" Zuiju exclaimed, but she was crushed by the wall and could not move any further.

When she opened her eyes, Fanlu's face had loomed into her sight, about a foot away.

“What...what are you doing?”

“Judging by your expression, it seems you don’t know yet.” Fanlu mercilessly pinched her chin, “Has Chu Beijie never touched you, even though you’ve been with him for so long?”

Zuiju had always accompanied and been spoiled by her Teacher. Wherever she went, the title of the genius doctor’s disciple had followed, so even the Royal House of Dong Lin had treated her with respect. There was no way she had ever been threatened by a man so close before.

Fanlu’s warm breath brushed over her face. He was indeed much scarier than the pack of wolves. Zuiju was terrified and embarrassed, she hurriedly said, “Go away, just go away!”

“Who are you?”

“Bai Pingting, I’m Bai Pingting!”

“Bai Pingting?” Fanlu harrumphed once, let her go and got off the bed.

Zuiju felt like she had just survived the clutches of death and she was somewhat relieved. She pressed even tighter against the wall.

Fanlu was born a spy. He was clever, understood how to read expressions, gaining the most important information from the enemy. How could he possibly not understand?

This woman was not Bai Pingting.

Whatever reason she had for having the luminous jade hairpin, she was not Bai Pingting.

When the Senior Official learned that Bai Pingting had died, he immediately raised Fanlu’s rank in joy, letting him become the governor of Qierou City.

He risked the death penalty for committing fraud, falsely reporting Pingting’s death. He thought that he had gotten a valuable commodity in return.

In the end, it was all a downright joke.

All sorts of different outcomes flipped around in Fanlu’s mind. From the corner of his eye, he monitored Zuiju who looked at him warily.

This woman wasn’t Bai Pingting. She wasn’t worth anything at all.

Not to mention, if the Senior Official knew what he had done, then death was sure to follow.

Kill her?

His hand slowly reached out towards the crossbow placed on the table.

However, he stopped when he touched the familiar handle made of twisted tendons.

What use was killing her? If Bai Pingting appeared before the eyes of the world’s people again, then even if he killed this woman, his lies will still be uncovered.

Fanlu turned his head, studying at the hostile woman on the bed.

She had big, raven black eyes, bushy black hair and stubborn lips.

That day, why did he seem possessed and end up saving her?

Apart from being a valuable commodity, what on earth was it about her that made him so fearless, risking his life to steal her from the mouths of the wolves?

He stared at her and stared for a long time, finally saying, "This is a place called Qierou, a small town in Yun Chang." He studied Zuji, the corners of his mouth lifting into that evil smirk that only belonged to himself. "I have just been appointed the city governor here and am the highest ranking official here. If you want to run, I'll hunt you back like a rabbit." He hesitated before adding, "Then, I will peel you like a rabbit and display you, naked, on the walls."

Yangfeng drank the medicine on her bed before lying down. Her body felt freshened but her heart was worried about Pingting. She beckoned to summon a maid.

The maid timidly said, "Madam, the Main General has said that Bai Pingting is in the guest room at the end of the corridor. Main General will immediately see Madam after the doctor has taken your pulse and set a description. Miss Bai also has attendants looking after her, so Madam only has to properly rest."

Yangfeng sat up from the bed and swivelled her legs to put on shoes. "Don't worry about the Main General; there's me. I won't force myself. Just one peek and then I will lay back down. I haven't seen Pingting's appearance clearly yet. That encounter wasn't long ago. What are you standing there for? Help support me."

The maid was terribly afraid that Ze Yin would be angry, but seeing Yangfeng's expression, she was also terribly afraid of Yangfeng. She was torn by this dilemma for a breath moment, and in the end, she came forwards to support Yangfeng. She called someone else to help, and the two supported her.

The maid confirmed, "Really just a peek? If the Main General decides to blame us, Madam must put in a few kind words for us."

"Understood." Yangfeng chuckled, "You two are just too clever. Why are you so afraid of the Main General, are you not afraid of me?"

She leaned on the shoulders of the two maids, slowly stepping out of the room.

They had managed to step onto the corridor, but happened to see Ze Yin and the doctor come out of the guest room. His face darkened as he strode towards them. He wrapped his arms around Yangfeng and held her up, helplessly reprimanding, "Did I not tell you to lay down properly? Why are you out of bed again? Now that Pingting's here, isn't she here for you to see at any time?"

He coldly glared at the two maids who were so scared they jumped right back.

Yangfeng was in his arms, feeling comfortable and cozy. She raised her head to look at her beloved man and smiled sweetly, "Don't blame them. How could they not obey an order from the dignified Main General's wife? Husband, how is Pingting? Is she very sick?"

"Her body is too weak. It certainly wasn't easy to last such a rough journey." Ze Yin carried her back to her room, while whispering "She's pregnant."

Yangfeng was stunned, her face full of surprise.

“It must be Chu Beijie’s child,” she whispered back.

“That’s right.” Ze Yin sighed, “From Ruohan’s letter, received yesterday, it seems the King of Dong Lin’s illness has gotten worse. His two princes are both murdered in the hands of our King and He Xia...” He bent down to put Yangfeng into bed before tucking her in.

“The blood of the Royal House is in Pingting’s belly.” Yangfeng slowly spat out this phrase and asked, “Then where is Chu Beijie? Where is he now?”

“No one knows of his whereabouts. Ever since hearing about Pingting’s death, it seems he has disappeared. Our King is delighted about this and held a three day banquet in the Royal Residence. If he knew that Pingting did not die and has his child, he would immediately rush back.” Ze Yin’s voice trailed off and looked at Yangfeng.

Yangfeng was also very hesitant. She carefully thought for a long time, sighing. “Although he is pitiful, he is also hateful. Even though he seems utterly heartbroken about Pingting today, perhaps if his country were to be in crisis tomorrow, he would immediately offer up Pingting. From what I see, the world under the skies already believes that Pingting is gone, so why don’t we take advantage of the wrongs? Let Pingting lead a peaceful life.”

“This...”

“This of course has to be what Pingting herself wants. I’ll talk to her about it. She will understand.” Yangfeng paused again for a while, “After such chaos, I will never let Pingting leave my line of sight again. Whether I am rich or impoverished, no matter what the outcome, we sisters will always be together. That way we can protect each other.”

Ze Yin knew that in Yangfeng’s heart, she still deeply regretted what had happened in the battle of Kanbu. This was a guilt she could never compensate Pingting in her lifetime.

But as long as Yangfeng was fine, what else mattered? Ze Yin never hesitated when he acted, and he rapidly nodded his head. “Fine. If Pingting decides to live with us in seclusion, then we will immediately pack up our belongings and move to somewhere else. This place is no longer safe. Ruohan knows, the King knows and even Chu Beijie knows. There is no way of knowing whether there will be someone else who stumbles here in the future.”

“This time, let’s not have any more connections with Bei Mo. Even if it’s Ruohan or the King, let’s stop all correspondence.”

Ze Yin studied her and lowered his voice, “Okay.”

“Husband...” A wave of gratitude welled up in Yangfeng.

The snow was melting, and the wind of spring was already on its way.

Pingting, do you still remember how we sang for fun, folded willow leaves, laughed at wave patterns at Prince He Su’s Residence? Do you remember playing qin and celebrating your birthday at the Jing-An Ducal Residence?

Today, He Su has become the sole master of his nation, and the House of Jing-An was in ashes.

He Xia travelled a thousand miles in one go, entered Yun Chang and became its Prince Consort.

The metamorphosis of life without experience is truly difficult to predict

But it's still nice. You and I are still here.

Because Ze Yin really wanted Yangfeng's illness to get better soon, he strictly ordered Yangfeng was not to leave her bed. He sent other people to attend to Pingting and naturally covered everything. He didn't feel pained at all and poured all sorts of precious herbs into her care like flowing water.

Yangfeng couldn't help it, she could only endure the seven or eight days. She obediently listened to the doctor and drank her medicine everyday at the right time. Now that she almost recovered, Ze Yin would occasionally bring their son to see his mother. She happily held onto her son, smelling and kissing him. She cooed, "Dear Qing'er, go see Aunt Pingting on behalf of your mother. There's a tiny younger brother in her belly, and he'll play with you in the future."

Ze Qing was barely a year old, so it was impossible for him to understand Yangfeng's words. His shiny black eyes looked left and right. He randomly opened his mouth to grin and laugh at her.

Ze Yin stood at one side, watching mother and son. He found this funny, "How do you know Pingting has a tiny younger brother in her belly?"

"Guessed, obviously. Is Pingting any better?"

Ze Yin's expression darkened slightly. He shook his head, "She doesn't say much and seems very upset. Is Zuiju her maid?"

Yangfeng shook her head. "No such person existed in the Jing-An Ducal Residence. If she is a maid, it must be someone Chu Beijie gave her." Although she had never seen Zuiju before, she pitied her fate from being torn by the wolves but was not as distraught like Pingting. Changing the topic, she asked Ze Yin, "Judging by her looks, does she still want to be with Chu Beijie? Chu Beijie has done terrible wrong to her, but she has his flesh and blood. I'm just afraid that Pingting's heart will soften."

Ze Yin hesitated at this. He led troops in a clear and logical formation, but this was a subject he didn't know much about at all. He scratched his head and said, "A woman's heart is much too hard to guess. How could I possibly tell?"

Yangfeng charmingly looked at him under her eyelashes, smiling, "I can tell. Main General, someone here has recovered long ago. Can't you just have pity on me and take back the strict order so I may get off this bed? It's not as impossible as rotting water or door hinges never being eaten by woodlice. Sick people need to walk a bit to get better soon too."

Ze Yin saw her smile as happy as blooming flowers. His body and mind were intoxicated. Thinking about Yangfeng trapped in bed for several days, he couldn't help soften his heart. He stroked the loosened strands on her silky black hair and said, "Don't push yourself and walk so soon after getting a little bit better. The winter snow has only just melted; it's still very cold. If you want to see Pingting, I'll carry you there." He then stood and picked Yangfeng in his arms.

Little Ze Qing was left on the bed. He cried and yelled as if unsatisfied.

Ze Yin smiled as he watched him. "Good son, you're still young. When you grow older, you can hold your own woman like this."

Yangfeng watched her husband teach their son and hurriedly shook her head, both amused and angry.

The guest room was very silent. The two entered, like honey and sugar, but their sunny mood was whipped back down.

“Pingting?”

Pingting was awake. She too received Ze Yin’s strict order to not get out of bed. She was currently sitting on the bed, her upper body leaning against a pillow at the head of the bed. Her lower half was covered by the blanket. Hearing Yangfeng’s voice, she seemed to be somewhat surprised. She turned towards them, her long black hair flickering past her shoulders. “Yangfeng?”

There was still some of her merry old self, but her cheeks had completely flattened down, creating a chilling feeling.

“Pingting, Pingting...” Yangfeng’s eyes became red, and she suddenly began to cry.

Ze Yin put Yangfeng down, arranging it so that she and Pingting were sitting side by side on the bed.

“Why are you crying?” Pingting lightly grabbed onto Yangfeng, softly chuckling, “I heard you were sick. Are you finally fine to see me now?” She raised her head and studied her.

Ze Yin stood like a steel tower at one side, watching over his wife protectively.

“Hm, much better.” Yangfeng then asked, “What about you?”

Pingting gratefully replied, “I’m much better too, thanks to Main General.”

“Have you had fetal medicine at the right times?”

“Yes.” Pingting lowered her head, gently stroking her slightly protruding stomach. “The child is very obedient and hasn’t kicked or messed around today.”

Yangfeng sighed. “You know how important your child is, so don’t bottle all your sadness up. Pingting, don’t blame yourself any more. That Zuiju is already dead. You can’t ruin your own life. What can it do to bring her back? Since you two are so close, she will definitely disapprove of your actions up in heaven.”

Ze Yin frowned, thinking that he had heard this before.

When Pingting heard the name “Zuiju”, her smile completely flew away. She sighed and raised her eyes, “I understand that idea, but my heart hurts. When I think of her, it’s like my heart is being stabbed by needles. I asked her to go down the mountain because I wanted to save her. Having one survive was better than both dying from hunger or cold. I never thought that she’d...”

Yangfeng saw she was unhappy again and quickly changed the topic. “I came here to discuss something else with you today. First of all, I have already decided that I won’t let you float around the four countries any more, causing me all this excess worry. Why don’t we move to somewhere else and live in seclusion together? Now it’s come to this, even if it’s not for you, at least think for your child. Don’t just grieve, plan out your future too.”

Pingting knew her words were right. She didn’t want Yangfeng to worry again. She cheered up and nodded her head thoughtfully. “Living in seclusion doesn’t sound too bad, but your Main General is far too famous and has a whole hoard of servants as well as great wealth. Where could you start living in seclusion? Even if you changed to another place, maybe in just three days, another general of Bei Mo will find you. I don’t want to let anyone know that I’m still alive, so I think I’ll just find another peaceful place to live with my child.”

Yangfeng realised that she hadn't mentioned that hateful man, Chu Beijie. She did seem much more energetic than before. She had been dearly excited, but as she heard more, she found out that Pingting had other plans. She hurriedly asked, "So what? We can dismiss our manservants and maids. Since we plan to live in seclusion, then what need is there for the luxury of the Main General Residence?"

Pingting studied her and shook her head. "You're not the same as me. I've gone through all sorts of bitter experiences. I've had officials steal my bags, climbed a snowy mountain and suffered hunger. I know what poverty is like. From a young age, you were sheltered in the Prince's Residence, and when you came to Bei Mo, you became the Main General's wife. How could you possibly last through such bitter world experiences?"

Yangfeng straightened on the bed, solemnly replying, "Pingting, I'm not joking here. After I learned you left the Bei Mo Main General Residence to head for Dong Lin to see Chu Beijie, my regret almost broke my intestines. You were sheltered in the Jing-An Ducal Residence too and treated like the only daughter of a rich family. How could I not be able to experience the bitter things you did?" She suddenly thought of something and dismissed her maids. Then she remembered that it was not out of her own decision. She stopped to turn to look at Ze Yin.

Ze Yin lowered his voice, "Don't worry, I'll arrange it."

When he had asked Yangfeng to marry him back then, he had long wanted to leave the battlefield and live in seclusion, wholeheartedly wanting to peacefully live out his life with her.

What did manservants or maids mean to him?

Yangfeng knew his kindness and was both touched and grateful.

Pingting watched the two and suddenly thought of Chu Beijie. The corners of her heart stung, but she refused to let it overwhelm her. She feared Yangfeng would see its traces, so she turned away from them, wiping the corners of her watery eyes on the pillow.

Ze Yin did as he said. That night, he summoned all of the maids and manservants into the hall, saying, "I have already promised Yangfeng to live in seclusion, this time never coming out again. Since we will be living in a very rural area, we will not need so many manservants. You are all young determined to serve this country hence you can all go back to the capital. I will write you a testimonial letter so the Main General Ruohan can organise you to go elsewhere. As for maids, all those who have homes can go home. Those who don't have one are free to leave as well and find another home. All of the furniture, furnishings in this room are mostly earned through rewards from my military achievements. All of them are treasures of the Royal Residence. Divide them all amongst yourselves, whether you use the money you gain to invest, or dowry or pension, anything is fine."

When his words came out, everyone cried out.

Ze Yin's expression did not change as he lowered his voice, "You all know my temper. Even three army troops must immediately listen to just a simple scolding, not to mention you all. Don't drag this on. No feast can forever continue under the skies. To scatter, happily and freely, is the true nature of my Bei Mo's sons and daughters. Also, there is an extra person here who you have all more or less guessed her identity. The world under the skies believes that she is dead. Not a word about the fact that she is still alive is to be spread outside. You all have accompanied me for many years, so I believe in you. However, I still would like you to swear here that you will never tell anyone."

When he finished, everyone understood that Ze Yin had already decided.

The servants accompanied Ze Yin's extensive travels and each were hot-blooded men. They had indeed hoped that Ze Yin would one day return to the capital to help with national affairs like last time. Hearing Ze Yin's words, they immediately swore they would never speak one word about Bai Pingting's survival.

The maids served the Main General Residence since young. Each were loyal to Ze Yin, and although they did not understand military or national affairs, they knew Bai Pingting was the Main General's wife's good friend and also left their promise.

Ze Yin worked orderly. He immediately called for brush and ink, swiftly writing the testimonial letters for the manservants. He then handed out the various treasures to each of the maids, so that they would not have to worry about the hunger and cold in the future. He was busy until late at night, until finally everything had been arranged, yet a difficult problem surfaced.

Guard Weiting was the only one who refused to leave. His eyes were bloodshot as he said, "I've been with Main General for so long, where else is there for me to go? Main General knows I have a foul temper, and if other generals order me around, I won't listen. Main General at least needs someone to help carry water or herd cattle, even in the mountains right? If you refuse to take me along, then I shall die here today." He pulled out his sword and placed it on his neck.

His main problem was that he couldn't read expressions, resulting in conflict between a great number of generals, including Ruohan. However, when he fought, he was not afraid of death, and his power was commendable. Because of this, Ze Yin valued him and had always kept him by his side.

Ze Yin knew his temper and perhaps if he did shake his head, perhaps he would really slice his neck. He suddenly remembered Weiting offended many important generals of Bei Mo. Even if he were recommended back, he would be bullied or worse. He could only nod, "Oh well, you can stay then."

Apart from Weiting, there was also Ze Yin's nurse and Uncle Xu who had watched him grow up. The two of them were both very old, so naturally Ze Yin had kept them by his side to repay his debts until their dying breath.

"All has been done. All that remains is to find a good place to live in seclusion."

Pingting considered this for a while, replying, "I know of a good place. There's a quiet little village on the foot of the other side of the Songsen Mountains. There's land that can be cultivated, as well as a grassland that can be grazed. Although it's a little poor, all of the people there are kind-hearted."

"If even you praise this place, it must be good." Yangfeng always trusted in Pingting's opinions. She asked Ze Yin, "Then there, okay?"

Ze Yin lovingly looked at her. "If you like it, then there is fine."

"There's something else," said Pingting, "I would like to move Zuiju's grave too. I don't want her to be left alone here."

Yangfeng replied, "That's easy. We'll take out her remains and take it on the road."

"Zuiju's Teacher is Dong Lin's genius doctor Huo Yunan." Pingting took out a letter from her sleeves, "I heard Zuiju is his only disciple and beloved, star pupil. I have written a letter. Please find someone to pass it on for me, Main General. If he asks who wrote it, just say it was from one of Zuiju's friends."

Ze Yin took it, "Rest assured, I will definitely get it sent."

When they returned to the room, however, Ze Yin asked Yangfeng, "Do you think this letter should really be sent?"

Yangfeng stiffened, "Why not?"

“Huo Yunan is Dong Lin’s genius doctor and often enters the Royal Residence. He has a deep friendship with the Royal House of Dong Lin. If this letter is sent and Huo Yunan gets suspicious that it was Zuiju who died, what would happen to Pingting? I’m afraid he might make the connection.”

Only then did Yangfeng understand. Her expression changed, “Pingting has Chu Beijie’s flesh and blood in her belly. Royal House wars are terrifying as well, not to mention Chu Beijie has disappeared. If she were swept into the wars for the throne...will they send someone to kill Pingting?”

Ze Yin nodded, “I’m worried about that.”

“Having said that, this letter must not be sent.” Yangfeng only cared about Pingting’s safety, nothing for a random Dong Lin genius doctor. She thought a little, set a plan, and reached out. “Give it to me.” When she got the letter, she passed it straight into the flame of the candle. She watched the flame rise and whispered slowly, “Pingting, I know you’re good-hearted and can’t bear the thought of Zuiju’s teacher looking for his disciple. However, your safety is very important, so let me decide for you this time.”

Everyone in the secluded residence was used to Ze Yin’s vigorous and resolute style of living. Although they were all reluctant to leave, no one cried.

In just a few days, everyone scattered in groups. The various antiques inside the room were also removed.

Only Ze Yin’s family of three, Pingting, Uncle Xu, the nurse and Weiting were left behind, a total of seven. They took the remaining money Ze Yin had and set off on their journey, this time, really leaving the national affairs of Bei Mo behind.

Chapter 53

When Gui Changqing learned of Bai Pingting’s death, it felt like the huge stone in his heart had been put to rest. He was so happy he immediately raised the soldier in question, Fanlu, to a city governor, after strictly telling him to keep it a secret.

He didn’t quite exactly know whether the situation had really improved, but it seemed that the hanging clouds of unnecessary loss of life over Yun Chang had suddenly dispersed. Not only did the war not begin, Chu Beijie was still utterly distraught over the matter about Pingting and disappeared. Dong Lin was an entire mess now and was completely incapable of threatening Yun Chang. The command flag in the Prince Consort’s hands had also returned to the Princess as there were no more wars to be fought.

“Haha,” laughed Gui Changqing, overcome by his emotions, “It seemed this Bai Pingting step was done well.”

He did hope that others wouldn’t find out Bai Pingting’s death had to do with Yun Chang. He had kept the secret for several days, waiting until Bei Mo had openly mourned and spread Bai Pingting’s death to the rest of the world. Only then did he head to the Royal Residence to tell Princess Yaotian.

“Died?” Yaotian was taken aback. She lowered her voice, “Didn’t I tell Senior Official the battle is over hence it’s fine to leave Pingting to her own life and death. Why didn’t you let her go?”

“Princess misunderstood. How could I not obey Princess’ orders? Bai Pingting attempted to bypass the checkpoints of the Yun Chang border, thinking to enter Bei Mo by crossing the Songsen Mountains. Unfortunately, her wisdom brought her to her demise. She met wolves in the mountains.”

Yaotian was dubious. She remained silent for a while, before frowning, “Does the Prince Consort know?”

“The news has already spread. Prince Consort should already know.” Yaotian sighed heavily. Gui Changqing was curious, “What’s wrong, Princess? Bai Pingting died a premature death. Is this not to the benefit of Princess?”

Yaotian’s smile was bitter. “If Prince Consort knows that Bai Pingting died, his mood must be terrible. If he’s upset, how could I possibly not be either?”

Gui Changqing saw Yaotian deeply cherished He Xia and was secretly alarmed by this. He quickly changed the subject. “Come to think of it, last time Princess gave an Order to build the army a treasury and granary. I have temporarily suspended this Order.”

Yaotian looked at Gui Changqing surprised. “Military affairs are urgent. Even if we hurry, it’s still not quick enough. Why did Senior Official suspend it?”

“I think, this isn’t quite right.”

“He is a dignified Prince Consort. What isn’t quite right about him being in charge of a single treasury and granary?”

“Princess, listen to my words.” Gui Changqing stood up and took two steps forward. His tone was very warm. “The Prince Consort already has military power, and the only thing that can control him is grain and money. If he has both, what else does Princess have to rein back the Prince Consort?”

Yaotian sighed faintly. “I know Senior Official is thinking about me. However, I am already husband and wife with the Prince Consort. He has been working hard day and night for Yun Chang, however, we keep suspecting him and trying to hold him back. Senior Official, is that really okay? He and I are now one. Don’t forget, his future son will become the master of Yun Chang one day.”

From ancient history and even now, the feelings between man and woman had always been the most difficult to organise. Many people had fallen into its trap, and they could not be pulled out whatsoever.

If Yaotian was a normal woman, this kind of thinking was utterly perfect in every way. However, she was the representative of Yun Chang’s Royal House.

Gui Changqing knew it would be difficult to convince further, but he had to continue. He coughed once before softly continuing, “Princess, do you remember the words you said to me on your wedding day?”

“My wedding day?” Yaotian’s expression was one of recollection. She laughed shallowly, “How could I forget it? That day, Yaotian was feeling very uneasy and asked Senior Official into the room to have a private conversation with me.”

“Princess wondered how it was possible to keep He Xia’s heart and told me to think ways to do so.” Gui Changqing bowed, “Back then, I promised Princess that I’ll put my heart into it.”

When Yaotian heard this, her gaze flickered beyond him. She slowly said, “Yet today, why do I feel that every action of Senior Official is to force the Prince Consort’s person and heart further and further away from me?”

“Princess...”

“Senior Official doesn’t need to say any more.” Yaotian interrupted his word. She paused before revealing a solemn expression of determination. “I have already promised the Prince Consort to build a special treasury and granary for

the military. This is beneficial to the citizens of this country, so please do not argue any further, Senior Official, and quickly approve of it.”

Gui Changqing hesitated as well. Studying Yaotian’s expression, he knew that it was impossible to change her mind. He could only lower his head to say, “I...Yes.” He sighed.

Gui Changqing had been the official for many years and was considerate. Yaotian had always, since childhood, respected him as an elder. She never dismissed his opinions so abruptly before him. He seemed quite upset. She was silent for a long time before softening her voice, “Is there anything else Senior Official would like to tell me?”

Gui Changqing indeed have something he wanted to say.

“Ahem,” said Gui Changqing, “there’s something else.”

“Hm?”

“I would like to ask Princess to give a person to the Prince Consort.”

Yaotian was slightly stunned. She looked at Gui Changqing, “Who?”

“My newly adopted daughter, Huan Fengyin. Although she isn’t particularly beautiful, she is very gentle and likes to play qin and can sing. She is loyal and dedicated to the Royal House of Yun Chang.”

Yaotian processed what she heard. When she understood, her heart was very uncomfortable. She coldly replied, “Senior Official would like me to send a concubine to the Prince Consort Residence?”

“Yun Chang has prohibitions on expression, as a result Prince Consort and Princess do not live together. There must be at least one concubine in the Prince Consort Residence. After all, the Prince Consort almost raised Bai Pingting to a concubine last time. Now that Bai Pingting is dead, why doesn’t Princess be a little open and give one to Prince Consort?”

Yaotian’s expression was ugly. “Who says that the Prince Consort Residence needs a concubine? I am the Princess. If prohibitions can rise, then so can they fall.”

Gui Changqing smiled, “Princess is wrong. Prohibitions can change, but can people’s hearts change? Rather than letting the Prince Consort choose someone who Princess doesn’t like, it’s better for Princess to choose someone who can help Princess look after Prince Consort. With her there, the Prince Consort can’t easily get another Concubine and, if the Prince Consort’s heart is taken away by someone else, at least there’s someone who can pass on the message.”

The Princess’ chest began to tighten. She shook her head. “No. Others can be discussed but not this.”

Gui Changqing knew now was not the time to press on. He stepped back, “Since it’s like that, I will depart. Please consider it, Princess. It’s not too late to act after careful consideration.” He bowed and left the room.

Yaotian watched the brief dazzle of the curtains. She was the only one left in the room. Her original good mood was completely ruined by Gui Changqing’s various proposals. She couldn’t help hate him secretly.

What reigning back in, when he actually dared to want her to send in another?

She thought of how hateful the Yun Chang laws were. When women marry, of course they should live together with their husband. Yet why was the utterly pitiful Princess had to stay in the Royal Residence? It seemed there were two

stars on opposite sides of the silver river. One star was the Royal Residence, the other being the Prince Consort Residence, and the residents could only stay inside, watching the other miserably.

However...

He Xia was strong and handsome. His fame was enough to shake the skies. As a hero, he had had a great number of experiences in the world. Now that he was the Prince Consort, he had more power and fame. Just how many people secretly watched him from the darkness with red cheeks? How could she stop him from two-timing or even three?

What if the Prince Consort really fell in love with someone and begged to establish her as a concubine? People would be interested to see what she, the dignified Princess, would do. If she refused, everyone would be able to ridicule her jealous heart.

Yaotian looked in the mirror, unsatisfied. The jealousy in her eyes reflected in the mirror gave her a fright. She hurriedly fished out a scarf and covered the mirror.

Luyi was outside the curtains. "Princess, the dried flowers have arrived."

Yaotian's mood was irritable and did not want to be disturbed by anyone. She lifted her voice, "Take it away. If there's nothing major, don't report it."

Luyi heard the anger hidden in her voice and jumped back. She lowered her voice, "Yes." She secretly poked out her tongue, not knowing what the Senior Official said that made the Princess so angry.

When she was just about to take away the vase full of dried flowers and leave, she heard another order from Yaotian. "Luyi, just wait there."

Luyi suddenly stopped, relying, "Yes." She waited outside the curtain.

Why did she, as a Princess, have to stay in the Royal Residence? It was so unfair...

Yaotian thought about Gui Changqing's proposal, carefully pondered it and realised it wasn't unreasonable.

That Fengyin was "not particularly beautiful", so even if the Prince Consort finds her fresh at first, ten days or half a month later, his interest would slowly fade. "Very gentle, likes to play qin and can sing" could only relieve the Prince Consort of his boredom.

As a person the Senior Official found, Yaotian completely trusted in this Fengyin. She would pour tea at one side or sometimes be as close as a pillow to easily monitor the Prince Consort's every action. Secondly, if the Prince Consort really were to be hooked away by another woman, Fengyin could deal with it by screaming and making noise, acting as the difficult corner of connection.

"Indeed, it seems it is not entirely unreasonable." Yaotian murmured to herself, slightly moved. But when she thought of an extra concubine by He Xia's side, her eyebrows furrowed and could feel not one part of her body be comfortable. It was unspeakably suffocating.

Luyi stood outside and heard Yaotian's pacing footsteps. Occasionally she'd bring the gems of the bead curtain to collide fiercely into each other, but not long later, there was no movement again. It was a long gap before she heard a voice from inside, "Luyi."

"Luyi is here, Princess."

"Send someone to the Senior Official and say..." The voice inside stopped again.

Luyi strained her ears and waited for a long time. She puzzledly looked inside the curtains.

Yaotian was standing in the middle of the room. Her back was straightened, and she was as motionless as a statue.

“Princess?” Luyi probed with her question.

Yaotian helplessly sighed. Her face was deathly gray, “Just say, Princess has thought it though so Senior Official can go ahead. The Royal Order will be written soon and sent to the Prince Consort Residence.”

He Xia’s horse had been galloping nonstop for the entire day. It had not drank a single drop of water even upon returning to the Prince Consort Residence, as the messenger from the Royal Residence had come to pass on the Royal Order.

He Xia received the Order inside the room, and he asked someone to send off the messenger. Dongzhuo saw there wasn’t any people around and lowered voice, “They still aren’t satisfied with the spies amongst the servants and have to put another by your pillow. I bet it’s handiwork of that Senior Official.”

He Xia held the order, his face ashen and silent.

Not long later, a manservant came to report, “Prince Consort, there is a carriage outside the residence. It seems to be the Miss Fengyin the Princess has given to Prince Consort.”

Anger crossed He Xia’s eyes. He faintly replied, “Understood, I’ll go now.” He strode on the way. The moment he stepped out of the Prince Consort Residence gates, his ashen face had already become a smile.

“Miss Fengyin must be tired.” He Xia personally went forwards, gracefully helping the woman off the carriage.

Fengyin reached the ground, slowly bowing to He Xia. “Prince Consort.” Her voice was timid. She raised her eyes to look at He Xia. They were also shy.

The two entered the residence together. He Xia led her to the rear courtyard, saying as he walked, “The Royal Order only just arrived, so Miss’ room has not been decided yet. Why not go and have some tea in the room. Once dinner is finished, the maids should be finished.”

Fengyin lowered her head. “Fengyin received the Royal Order to serve the Prince Consort. I am merely a servant; there is no need to have a separate room. Prince Consort can give Fengyin any room that previous maids have lived in, any is fine.” She stopped at one which happened to be where Pingting had lived.

Dongzhuo’s expression suddenly changed. He took a few steps forwards but saw a warning glance from He Xia, so he gritted his teeth and withdrew.

He Xia’s voice became gentle, “Since it’s like that, this room is empty indeed. It might be a little troublesome, but Miss can stay here.”

“Thank you, Prince Consort.” Fengyin gently smiled before she swivelled to He Xia. “Fengyin will now go into the room to tidy her belongings before serving the Prince Consort during dinner.”

“Go ahead.”

He watched her push open the doors and step inside.

He Xia didn't make a word and turned away. Dongzhuo's expression was dark as he followed behind. When they passed the fake mountain, they heard the plucking qin sound. It appeared that Fengyin was fiddling with that guqin in the room.

Dongzhuo furiously stopped moving. He grinded his teeth, "Gui Changqing, the old fool who can't die, went way too far this time! Master, why..." When he raised his head, he realised He Xia was already far away.

When all the snow melted, spring had finally come.

It was finally the season to pick flowers.

Compared to previous years, the circumstances of the four countries had become a completely different situation again.

In the Gui Le Royal Residence, the relationship between the King and the Queen's family was like a current secretly flowing under ice, whirling out more and more urgently.

The Main General of Bei Mo officially headed to live in seclusion, taking his wife and child away from the old location.

The King of Dong Lin died through despair, lament and disease. Under all of the officials, the Queen of Dong Lin boarded the highest, centermost throne of the state hall.

Accompanied with Bai Pingting's death was the disappearance of the Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie.

Only one of the two famous generals were left. Only the Marquis of Jing-An, He Xia remained but he didn't do anything particular.

To dominate the world, one must first revived and prepared.

As a result, the hand that held the sword of Yun Chang's Prince Consort remained calm and composed.

Outside Yun Chang.

Late in the night, the moon shone brightly while the insects crooned softly.

In a small cabin outside the forest, a white-haired, old man was sat cross-legged. His young student respectfully said, "I have something I don't understand and would like Teacher to teach me. Teacher taught in Bei Mo for many years and was beloved there. Why were you determined to leave Bei Mo and came to Yun Chang?"

The old man laughed. "When old, people fear death. The four countries are soon to become a mess. Where else am I to hide apart from the safest place, Yun Chang?"

The student was curious, "How does Teacher know that Yun Chang is the safest place?"

"Haha, the two famous generals under the skies are Chu Beijie and He Xia respectively. Who remains?"

"Chu Beijie's whereabouts is unknown, while He Xia is currently the Prince Consort in Yun Chang's capital."

"How could the Marquess of Jing-An really be satisfied as the Prince Consort?" The old man sighed, "Gui Le has directed their own ruin by forcing out—tearing down—their safety barrier—the House of Jing-An. Bei Mo has lost Ze

Yin while Dong Lin has lost Chu Beijie. Whenever He Xia leads the Yun Chang army out to kill, none of the three countries have good enough generals to oppose He Xia. Where else, apart from Yun Chang, can you hide from the war?"

"Teacher's conclusion has come down too soon."

"Who else could possibly rival He Xia as a general?"

"There's one," said the disciple, "Chu Beijie."

The old man smiled as he looked at him, an insensible and spoiled child. "Where is Chu Beijie now?"

That disciple was plenty stubborn himself. He replied, "As long as he is alive, he remains a famous general and He Xia's opponent."

"So what if he's alive? He is just a walking zombie, so even if he does face He Xia, he will simply give away his life for nothing."

"There is someone who can definitely make him start anew."

"Who?"

"Bai Pingting."

The old man laughed, "And where is Bai Pingting now?"

The disciple was surprised. He lowered her head, "She is dead."

"Correct, she is a dead." The old man stroked his long gray beard and softly sighed.

The disciple still refused to give up. "If Chu Beijie could start anew for a Bai Pingting, why can't he do so for others?"

The old man's gentle gaze rested on the face of his disciple. In the depths of his eyes, its corners were yellowed with age, but the light flickering was the fire of wisdom.

"Have you ever heard of Bai Pingting's qin?"

"I haven't."

"Have you ever met Bai Pingting?"

"I haven't."

"Have you ever seen the letter Bai Pingting had to the Princess of Yun Chang to pass onto Chu Beijie on the battlefield?"

"I haven't." The disciple had his head lowered as he replied, "I have only heard of her name, as well as what she has done."

Bai Pingting, Bai Pingting of the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

Her name had spread through the world.

And her story was yet finished.

Chapter 54 (Extra)

To understand a man, perhaps a whole lifetime was needed.

But some men, perhaps not even a whole lifetime was enough, was what Zuiju thought.

Fanlu was that kind of hateful guy. He seemed even more watery than girls, by having no fixed state. If you studied him, sometimes his sharp eyes flashed with kind light. The next moment he'd become vicious, like a demon king who was about to eat humans. After a while, a playful smile would suddenly float out again.

That man was wicked man.

He leisurely held his light crossbow as he cornered Zuiju to an edge. Then, for some weird wacky reason, he snatched her away from the sharp teeth and claws of the wolf pack, saving her.

Although he had saved Zuiju's life, he didn't return her freedom.

"If you want to run, I'll hunt you back like a rabbit." When saying this, an evil smile played on the corners of Fanlu's mouth.

Zuiju had glared fiercely at him, secretly vowing to never let him catch her.

This vow was unfulfilled. For the whole year, she didn't even have the chance to run away.

Fanlu was an expert at imprisoning people. He could always see through Zuiju's long-planned escape plans, chuckling at how easy it was to break her beautiful dream.

"Why?" Zuiju asked, unsatisfied.

"You're not a person of the army. You never learned unarmed combat or how to imprison a captive properly. You haven't learned how to track down enemies in rural places either." Fanlu then answered with another question, "How could you possibly escape from my hands?"

"Why are you imprisoning me? Isn't it better to kill me? I don't want to live anyway."

Fanlu replied with another question, "Do you really not want to live?"

Zuiju was stunned.

When she woke from her coma, thinking about Pingting's situation, she really didn't want to live any longer.

But now?

If her death goes unnoticed, what would her Teacher do?

She could only lower her yells and coldly harrumph, "Whether I want to die or not, it's none of your business is it?"

Fanlu was briefly surprised and coldly harrumphed back, “When I decide my answer to that question, maybe living won’t be an option anymore.”

With the privileges as the guard of Qierou City, the prison was more ironclad in many ways, yet Zuiju still persevered in finding ways to escape.

Fanlu finally had enough this time. He grabbed onto her wrists, fiercely pushing her into the wall. “You want to return to Dong Lin this much?”

“Who said I wanted to go to Dong Lin.”

“Then to the Songsen Mountains?”

“It’s none of your business!”

“As expected...” Fanlu held her so that she couldn’t move at all, like usual, but the corners of his mouth lifted this time. A deceptive look surfaced on his face. He slowly drawled, “Bai Pingting was on the Songsen Mountains after all.”

Zuiju was shocked. She sucked her lips tightly and turned away.

Pingting, if Pingting were still on the Songsen Mountains, then maybe...

“You took the luminous jade hairpin to look for helpers right?” Fanlu forcefully twisted her back by the chin, staring deeply into the wobbling light in her eyes. He studied them for a long time and lowered his voice, “It seems that if Bai Pingting didn’t die of cold, then she has died of hunger.”

“Liar! You liar! Liar, liar!” Zuiju immediately screeched at Fanlu, crying, “She must’ve been saved by someone, or maybe she had enough energy and walked down by herself. Maybe she...”

She suddenly stopped talking, shocked as she found herself in Fanlu’s arms. In her whole lifetime, apart from her Teacher, she had never been so close to a man. She felt she was being engulfed by fire as Fanlu hugged her.

Zuiju screamed, abruptly pushing Fanlu away. “Don’t touch me!”

She summoned all of her energy for that one push. Fanlu took two steps back and steadied himself. His expression changed a few times. He turned to leave. Zuiju finally released her held breath, gasping for large gulps of air to enter her lungs.

Fanlu returned later in the evening. He carried Zuiju’s dinner, having one pot of alcohol for himself. Zuiju had her head lowered as she ate. He sat in front of her, not using cups, just pouring the alcohol straight into his mouth. Once all of the alcohol entered his throat, his gaze rested on Zuiju.

His gaze was cold and harsh, his black eyes hiding all sorts of evil intentions. It made everything in the prison seem like a taut string, as if the slightest trigger would induce a terrible incident.

The food seemed to be stuck to Zuiju’s backbone as it went down. She felt like she was facing a wild beast, and when she put down her plate, she quickly retreated to the furthest corner of the bed. However, even if the prison was ten times larger, it was still not enough for her to escape his murderous and savage eyes.

Zuiju didn’t say anything that night. It made him seem even more like an irrational lurking wild beast.

Zuiju had always thought that she encountered the worst already. Now she finally realised that there were even worse things than waiting.

Fanlu's vicious evil, at first, was nasty and hateful, but the Fanlu now could only make her feel fearful.

Fanlu didn't say a word that night and had almost driven Zuiju crazy with his gaze until he stood up to leave again.

Zuiju watched his back disappear and felt she had survived the impossible. She touched her forehead, drenched in sweat.

Her nightmare had not ended. For ten days consecutively, Fanlu came with alcohol to the prison. Once, he drowsily stumbled his way to the bed, staring at Zuiju with his red eyes. Seeing his huge figure slowly threatening to her, she couldn't help but scream.

The scream brought Fanlu back to his senses.

He shook himself and shook his head as he left.

Zuiju couldn't stand such torture. A woman's nature caused her to understand the what in the coldness of Fanlu's smile meant.

She helplessly looked at the sturdy prison cell. This isolated place was even quieter and apathetic than before.

If it's really...

Then I will die.

Zuiju clenched her fists tightly.

Not knowing how many days she had endured, Fanlu finally stopped drinking.

"Why aren't you trying to escape these days?"

"Hmph."

"Tut tut, I was planning to strip you the next time you racked your brains to form a ridiculous plan. Who knew that you actually listened? What a pity, a pity indeed."

"You..."

It seemed like he was pulling an opera. With just one shake of his body, he'd become all nonchalant again. Occasionally he'd be a vicious villain or the joker who liked to tease Zuiju.

When he came to bring dinner, he suddenly asked, "Do you want to check out the Songsen Mountains?"

Zuiju looked up in surprise.

Fanlu's expression was so calm it didn't seem to know what it was saying.

"Want to go?"

"Ah?"

“It’s fine if you don’t.” Fanlu turned around.

Zuiju started to shout. “Want! I want to go.”

Fanlu’s footsteps stopped. His back view was no longer slovenly but dignified.

Zuiju stared at his spine.

Idiot, he’s lying to you.

Idiot, he’s teasing you, like teasing a little dog in his cage.

“When I’ve finished arranging city affairs, we’ll head out.”

Fanlu only said it once, making Zuiju almost think she heard wrong. She stood in the prison, stunned, racking her brains over and over again in disbelief.

Fanlu had already left.

Although Zuiju didn’t believe him at first, three days later, they set off on their journey.

Fanlu didn’t bring any other companions; the two were alone.

Qierou wasn’t particularly close to the Songsen Mountains. When Fanlu brought the comatose Zuiju from the Songsen Mountains to Qierou, it had taken half a month. Now that both were on horse, it would take at least ten days.

Zuiju guessed, “You’re afraid I’ll leak your secret.”

“Hm?”

“You hid the truth from the Senior Official of Yun Chang, falsely reporting Pingting’s death. If I yell a single sentence in a crowd, you’re so dead. That’s why you don’t dare take me to places with people.”

Fanlu was lazily leaning against a rock. He coldly said, “I just don’t want to be the one to personally cut your neck.”

Nevertheless, both people hoped to reach the Songsen Mountains as soon as possible. Fanlu was a city governor, and it was more or less an unauthorised absence.

Zuiju’s heart suffered even more each step towards the Songsen Mountains.

Pingting, are you still alive?

I dearly hope I won’t find you in that rocky area.

The two people on fast horses, with whips, finally arrived at the foot of the Songsen Mountains.

Fanlu found a bush to hide and secure the horse before taking out a uniquely shaped metal hook from his waist. “I’ll let you see how real spies climb mountains.”

He had prepared two tools, giving one to Zuiju.

The Songsen Mountains were as familiar as home to Fanlu. He was like an ape in the forest and a wild lion in the grass. Zuiju watched him easily jump over a rocky section and saw that he was deeply versed in poisonous weeds as well as various natural traps.

Back then, she and Pingting had taken several days and nights stumbling at this rocky area with great difficulty. With Fanlu leading the way, they had reached it within a day.

Zuiju was amazed.

“It’s here?”

“Yeah.”

No rock had changed.

Standing before the rocky area, Zuiju deeply remembered the wind and snow back then.

The wind howling, Pingting’s pale face and the green glow of the luminous jade hairpin in the darkness.

“I will hurry to where Yangfeng is and get her to tell him to send his mountaineering experts with ginseng. I’ll make some preparations over there, so they’re ready when you arrive.”

Three days, life or death, only three days.

“Pingting! Pingting!” Zuiju couldn’t help shout at the deserted rocky area.

Fanlu stood afar, watching her agitatedly search.

After searching thoroughly, she searched again.

The skies gradually began to darken. Fanlu only slowly walked over when Zuiju’s figure became blurry against the rocks.

The exhausted Zuiju finally stopped. She sat down, panting for air. When she heard Fanlu’s footsteps, she raised her head, softly saying, “Can’t find her, I can’t find her.” She bursted into tears as she cried in joy, “That’s awesome, she isn’t here. She must have left, must have left...” She was so happy. She probably went crazy as she wrapped her arms around Fanlu’s waist as continued to cry. “She must still be alive. I know she wouldn’t die.”

When she raised her head, she was met with Fanlu’s smile. Fanlu had never responded with such a decent smile and in the single moment of a breath, Zuiju’s sanity returned.

This man, this man is...

The smile froze on her face as she lowered it. But very soon, Zuiju was even more stunned to realise that her arms were around Fanlu’s waist.

“Ah!” She yelped softly, letting go, unwittingly pushing him away.

Her heart was bouncing about everywhere as if criticising her frivolous madness. She didn’t have any courage to see Fanlu who had just been pushed away.

The entire Songsen Mountains seemed to stiffen and become silent.

“Hmph...”

In the silence, Fanlu sneered which was particularly chilling.

The two spent the night in the rocky area.

Perhaps it was because the tip of the Songsen Mountains had never melting snow all year round, Zuiju felt that night was colder than usual. When she woke up early the next morning, she was shocked to bits by Fanlu’s gaze.

His gaze was even more profoundly dark than usual. In the Songsen Mountains, he seemed all the more like a wild beast who ate people.

Zuiju followed him silently down the mountain. Fanlu didn’t use those weird mountaineering tools again. He just slowly walked through the forest. Zuiju followed behind, increasingly unsettled.

Fanlu’s eyes were dangerous.

Now that she knew Pingting was not in the rocky area already, why not take the opportunity to run? Zuiju’s heart thumped as she peeked at Fanlu in front.

He focused on moving forwards and had not once looked back to look at Zuiju.

Zuiju cautiously followed him until they reached a bend where she suddenly rushed for the dense forest on one side.

The wind began to howl.

Zuiju didn’t dare look back to see. She already knew of Fanlu’s terrifying tracking abilities in the mountains. Therefore, she kept on running without stop. The trees in the forest had already grown green leaves, not as empty as they were in winter. However, it felt Zuiju had returned to winter. Her process of desperately running to escape repeated itself.

She ran on crazily, not daring to stop and afraid to look back.

She crossed small patches of rocky areas. Dense bushes and even massive trees in the forest quickly passed her sides.

Her lungs began to burn like fire, leaving burning waves of pain.

She didn’t know how long she ran or how far, but she could never support her weight again. Both her knees collapsed. She leaned on a tree, desperately gasping for breath.

“Had enough of running?” said a cold male voice above her head.

Zuiju abruptly raised her head, inhaling the cool air.

Fanlu was leisurely sitting on the tree, his icy cold eyes startling her.

Before Zuiju could take another step, Fanlu turned a somersault as he jumped off the tree, accurately landing in front of her.

“Didn’t I tell you your fate if you tried to escape?” Fanlu sighed, “Why did you still try?”

Zuiju finally registered his words. “You did that on purpose.” She took a step back, both frightened and angry. “You cheater how dare ah!”

Fanlu grabbed her, “What cheaters dare do, I dare do.” He opened his fingers.

Rip! He tore a piece of Zuiju’s clothing.

“No! Let go of me, let go of me!”

Rip! Another piece of fabric was torn off.

Zuiju finally understood how terrifying a man’s power was. She began to cry, “I won’t run, just let go of me.”

“It’s too late,” Fanlu pressed on.

“No, no!”

Fanlu’s heavy breath sprayed on her neck. His teeth nibbled her white skin.

“No,” Zuiju helplessly shook her head.

Her delicate shoulders ached from being rubbed against the gravel on the ground. She could see the terrible storm clouds above.

Zuiju desperately raised her head, her body feeling cold as half of her coat had been torn to pieces, scattered in all directions. She only had her single underdress on which was completely unable to protect her.

“I beg you...”

“It’s too late.”

Zuiju closed her eyes in despair.

She felt the weight on her body lift, Fanlu had left instead. Zuiju opened her eyes in surprised, seeing that Fanlu had stood up and had a very alert expression on his face.

“Who’s there?” Fanlu demanded.

“That Missy isn’t too bad.” Shadows began to reveal in groups out of the forest, forming arcs that then surrounded them. The man leading them looked at Zuiju and licked his lips, “Bro, it’s not too fun to eat alone. You can start first, and then let us bros try it too, ok?”

Bandits? Zuiju’s heart began to tighten. She huddled up, hugging her body.

Fanlu silently considered a little and nodded, “Indeed, it’s not fun to eat alone.” While he said this, he took off his own coat. He tossed it beside Zuiju’s foot.

“Hah, guess you’re experienced.”

“But so it happens, I like to eat alone.” Fanlu laughed scornfully.

All of the bandits were stunned.

“What a person who doesn’t fear death.” The boss fiercely beckoned to him with his chin, “My bros, attack!”

Around ten bandits had their knives flashing in the light as they rushed towards him.

Fanlu took out his light crossbow, put two arrows and shot down two with a whoosh.

“Kill him!”

Whoosh, whoosh! Two arrows flew again, but there were too many bandits. They had already forced their way up. Fanlu tossed away the crossbow in his hands and pulled out his sword. It clanged as it collided with his opponent's knives.

“Ah!” Zuiju yelped somewhere behind. Fanlu turned away and pierced the bandit that had pounced towards Zuiju.

The sound of a sharp sword splitting the air sounded behind, but Fanlu was already too late by the time he turned back. He felt an immense pain on his right forearm and fresh blood began to drip onto the ground.

Clang! Fanlu swapped his sword onto his left hand, raising his arm to block another hit. He turned back to stare at Zuiju, “Why are you still here?”

Zuiju had already picked up his coat and put it around herself. “I...”

“Scram.” Fanlu coldly said these words. His expression suddenly darkened as the dissonant sound of metal entering flesh came again. His anger came out with the injury. His eyes became red as he shouted, “I’ll fight you to death!”

He blocked the way to Zuiju, refusing to back away. He pressed on instead, stepping forwards several times.

Zuiju took advantage and exhausted all of her energy to run in the direction behind.

She ran back the way she came. The massive trees in the forest quickly passed her sides.

Run, run!

Even without looking back, she already knew she was far away. The sounds of killing became quieter and almost inaudible. This time she didn’t need to worry about Fanlu chasing as he was already soaked in blood and wouldn’t appear like a ghost above her again.

The sound of wind whirled in her ear.

Zuiju ran to a patch of rocky area, hiding herself in a little cave. The rock cave was well-hidden and should be enough to avoid the pursuers behind her, if anyone would anyway.

Huff, huff...

She panted noisily in the tiny space.

Even after a long time passed, her heart did not stop frantically jumping. She felt as if she was freezing, despite her clothing. When she touched it, its rough texture made her understand that it was Fanlu’s coat.

She had escaped, she had really escaped.

She was free.

Zuiju quietly sat in the cave. Her heart felt like it was suspended in air as it anxiously clamoured, unable to relax. She had originally planned to stay the night before leaving as perhaps she could avoid the terrifying bandits then

How was he? Zuiju stood up. She restrained her emotions and sat back down.

But not long later, she couldn't help but stand up again.

Was he dead?

That hateful guy?

That wicked man?

That shameless despicable cheater...was he dead? He could be killed by the bandits. There were numerous bandits and they could have swarmed around his body until his corpse was all minced up.

This made Zuiju shiver. No, no...no way!

It always seemed that villains could live a thousand years, so someone like him...

She searched for the path she had come from. As she had taken it twice today, she was already a little familiar with it. At first, she was walking hesitantly. For a reason she did not know, she suddenly began to frantically run, even faster than she had during her escape attempts.

Zuiju ran back to the place and suddenly stopped.

Her surroundings were quiet, even the chirping of birds could not be heard. The smell of blood filled this patch of forest and the red on the ground were solidified. Corpses lay everywhere, a mess.

Zuiju approached, mortified, looking for that wicked man's corpse.

No, she didn't hope to find his corpse!

Zuiju desperately crossed those bodies. She had seen fresh blood and corpses all over the ground before. It was even more tragic than this, in the Duke of Zhen-Bei's secluded residence.

But she hadn't been as worried as now.

Is he dead?

Dead?

Her foot hit something. She lowered her head, her tears pouring straight down.

It was the light crossbow, his favourite crossbow to have in his hands and play with.

Zuiju knelt down, picked up the crossbow and stood up again. She stumbled in the clearing as she looked.

Where, where was he?

He couldn't have been captured right? He had killed so many of the bandits. If he were still alive, then the ways he would be tortured were unthinkable. Maybe...

Zuiju suddenly stopped.

The grass half her height appeared to be hiding something. Although Zuiju couldn't see what it was, she rushed forwards as if she did know.

It was a very familiar back lying in the grass.

Zuiju knelt down, reaching out a hand to check his breathing.

Thank god, he was still alive.

“Oi! Oi!” Zuiju flipped him over.

Fanlu's face was full of blood and mud, but he still managed to open his eyes slightly. He feebly scorned, “Stupid thing, why are you still here?”

Zuiju was temporarily stunned. She couldn't help clench her teeth, “You're still alive?”

The corners of Fanlu's lips curved ever so slightly before his head drooped into unconsciousness.

“Oi! Oi! Oi! You hateful guy, don't really die on me!”

Zuiju didn't understand Fanlu, and she didn't understand much about herself either.

Such a great opportunity but she foolishly ran back and dragged this hateful guy ,who refused to die, down the mountain. She could do it with the tool Fanlu lent and taught her how to use. She finally managed to get down the mountain and found the horse they hid.

Fanlu was very injured and very heavy, even heavier than a boar. Zuiju had to pant every step she took while supporting him.

She was anxious to heal Fanlu's injury and even forgot that she ought to send a letter to her Teacher. The only thing that made her feel worthy of her Teacher was that her medical knowledge despite being imprisoned for so long.

She painstakingly put her life out to reach a place where there were people. She took some money out of Fanlu's bag, wrote a prescription and bought the herbs. She soon boiled them and bandaged his wounds until she was exhausted and her muscles ached.

“You're still here?” Fanlu was groggy. It was the first thing he said since opening his eyes.

Zuiju deftly helped him dress his wounds while using the dignified gaze of a doctor to stare at him. “You've lost too much blood, so talk less.”

“You're a doctor?”

“Hmph.”

Fanlu's eye swere muddled, and he fainted again.

His physique was good, so his wounds healed quickly. It seemed that he didn't have much strength however. He was out cold all day and night, and Zuiju even had to feed his meals to him.

Zuiju was secretly anxious and put in all her effort, hoping that he would get well soon.

That day, when Zuiju brought in the properly boiled medicine, she suddenly discovered he had gotten up already. He was dressed and had his crossbow in his hand, looking utterly healthy and energetic. He looked ready to leave, a complete change from his weak attitude yesterday.

“Let’s go.”

“Us? Go where?”

“Qierou of course.”

Zuiju understood and screamed. She threw down the medicine bowl to run outside, but Fanlu blocked her from the doorway. Fanlu evilly smirked, “Have you forgotten your fate if you tried to escape again?”

Zuiju huffed, “You cheater! You were better ages ago, yet pretended you couldn’t get off the bed, you...”

“I’m a cheater, and if you provoke me too quick, I’ll cheat a little more.” Fanlu grabbed onto her chin, his fingertips sliding across her red lips.

Zuiju shuddered.

“I saved your life.” She wasn’t satisfied.

“I saved your life too.”

Zuiju was trembling with anger, “I saved your life, but I didn’t lock you up.”

“That’s why,” Fanlu nodded, “I’m a cheater.”

She was caught by Fanlu and returned to Qierou once more.

She remained in the isolated prison and remained seeing that wicked man’s teasing smile every day.

Zuiju didn’t understand.

Didn’t understand that man.

Unless the world were to fall into chaos and Fanlu took her with him to leave, then perhaps she would never be able to leave this place in this lifetime.

Perhaps she would never understand that hateful guy in her lifetime.

Translation Notes:

- “Hunched over”: The subject or official would bend over usually when speaking to royalty. It’s like a bow that shows modesty.
- “Opera”: Reference to Chinese opera where the artist turns around and shifts through several different masks, each with their own expression. One can be sad while another could be angry or happy.
- “Silver river”: Allusion to the legend of the Qixi Festival. It’s about two starcrossed lovers that can only be together for a single night every year

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